

# Theatre preview: The Fever challenges actors and audience

New Edmonton production full of surprises

BY LIZ NICHOLLS, EDMONTON JOURNAL APRIL 22, 2014



Melissa Thingelstad in The Fever

Photograph by: Ryan Parker, PK Photography

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## PREVIEW

### The Fever

**Theatre:** theatre no. 6

**Written by:** Wallace Shawn

**Directed by:** Ian Leung

**Starring:** Melissa Thingelstad

**Where:** The Living Room Playhouse, 11315 106th Ave.

**Running:** Thursday through May 4

**Tickets:** TIX on the Square (780-420-1757, [tixonthesquare.ca](http://tixonthesquare.ca))

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EDMONTON - What are they trying to do? Start an argument?

Well, yes, actually. Five years ago we had our first run-in with a new theatre company devoted to the gutsy proposition that we might want to reassess our world view, our politics, our cultural (and theatrical) assumptions, and rethink the social/economic/scientific status quo. Theatre no. 6's calling card was Ian Leung's *U: The Comedy of Global Warming*, an intricately entertaining, multi-faceted, and multimedia experiment in marrying apocalyptic narratives and such comic forms as satire and the love triangle.

This week, theatre no. 6 is back at it, this time with *The Fever*, a stringent 1991 solo play by the New York playwright/actor/agent provocateur Wallace Shawn, who performed it himself in people's living rooms for maximum close-up impact. And speaking of living rooms, that's where *The Fever* opens Thursday, at Azimuth's eyeball-to-eyeball Living Room Playhouse, in a production directed by Leung and starring his theatre no. 6 (and real-life) partner Melissa Thingelstad.

The character we meet is a tourist, a veritable repository of liberal and civilized assumptions, who finds herself ill, shaken by a mysterious fever and shivering on the bathroom floor in a Third World hotel. Gradually, in our presence, "the narrator takes us along with her own argument with herself, as she works it out, and you arrive at the moment the penny drops," Thingelstad says.

"It's a very challenging piece to put up in front of people," says Leung, who's had *The Fever* on top of his do-list ever since he saw the 1993 Canadian première, starring Claire Coulter, at the late Phoenix Theatre. "I was just so struck by how unfiltered Shaw was in what he was saying: he's not trying to conceal it, he's saying it aloud, with great candour."

An actor in a living room with an intimate group of strangers is in a ticklish situation. That's the other challenge of *The Fever*, say Leung and Thingelstad — the theatrical convention. Is the person we meet a character in a play? The actor herself? Who are we, and why do we happen to be in a living room with her? Or are we in a theatre?

"Endlessly with this script I'm hearing new things I haven't thought of ... My brain is so full right now!" grins Thingelstad. She and Leung each bring activist sensibilities to the theatre. Leung has a University of Toronto science degree, and experience in the Ontario environment ministry; he left to study directing at the University of Alberta. Saskatchewan-born Thingelstad, whose day job is at FAVA (Film and Video Arts Society), left theatre school at the University of Calgary for international development studies at McGill before she returned to theatre school in Edmonton.

"Of late," says Thingelstad, "Ian and I have been talking about what kinds of contributions do we want to be making ... There's knowledge, but what's the action? What needs to be done? We have strong liberal points of view, but if they're just viewpoints ... That isn't the end of it." Leung invokes "slack-

tivism” to encompass the kind of good intentions and worthy perspective that never quite translate into activity. “We take consolation we’re right-thinking people. We’re as guilty as the character.”

“That said, the play has a wry sense of humour,” says Thingelstad. “It’s not stark and berating. It’s full of surprises, arguments you would never have thought to have with yourself.” As you might glean from her record of bravery with indie scripts in small spaces — Theatre Yes’s *The List*, Northern Light’s *The Accident* — she’s ready for her close-up, theatrically speaking. The Living Room Play House is an ideal site for *The Fever*. “I like us, me and the audience, being in the same space. I enjoy it when the audience feels it’s as much their play as mine.”

The theatre no. 6 season continues in October with a political satire that became a cause celebre in Canadian theatre in 2012. One of the characters in Michael Healey’s *Proud* is a stand-in for our current prime minister. “We want to do it before the next election, to encourage a dialogue,” says Leung. “Besides, it’s funny.” Brian Dooley will star as the PM, with Thingelstad as “an uncouth MP with no political instincts.”

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