

## Two Canadian women celebrate strength

By Milton Bass, Special to Berkshires Week,

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While the town of Lenox is churning itself into incomprehensibility over its impeccableness, two young Canadian women have described the soul of Berkshire County perfectly.

Both Catherine Taylor-Williams and Kristen van Ginhoven have their own theaters, the first The Wharton Salon in Lenox and the second the WAM Theatre in Pittsfield.

What makes them want to live and work in Berkshire County is what they described as "the culture" of the area. They are not talking so much about the regional theaters, the museums and the music and dance centers. Their emphasis is on the people who live here on both a year-round and seasonal basis. Some of them are borners, but a large portion migrated here strictly because of the atmosphere. Their souls could sense something that increased their appetites, that satisfied their hungers, that stretched their minds and comforted their bodies. They make culture a way of life as well as a word.

Taylor-Williams had trained as an actress in Canada and had toured the country forward and back, up and down, until, as she puts it, "I had run out of road. I was 29 years old and needed new places, new experiences."

A course taken with Dennis Krausnick, director of training at Shakespeare & Company, opened a new road for Taylor-Williams, and also a new husband, Robert Serrell, a fellow actor. After seven years as an actor-manager at Shakespeare, Taylor-Williams left the company for other pursuits.

One thing she has pursued is restoring theater at The Mount, the former home of writer Edith Wharton. Shakespeare & Company had been doing a series of plays at The Mount, mostly works that Dennis Krausnick had adapted from Wharton novels. The head of The Mount, Susan Wissler, wanted to continue the theater work, and Taylor-Williams wanted a theater company, so she raised her own funds in 2008 and has put on plays the last three years.

By coincidence, Kristin van Ginhoven, also at the age of 29, found herself in limbo while living in Toronto. She had started her career as an actress but lost her nerve and got a teaching degree at Queen's University which resulted in a four-year teaching stint in Belgium.

"I loved teaching at the college level," she said, "but I wanted to be a director."

Then she fell in love with a Britisher named Nick Webb who teaches computer science at Union College, and after their marriage they moved to the Berkshires. Her present career was inspired by reading a book, "Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity," by New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof and his wife, Sheryl WuDunn.

"It was a call to action for women and girls to take action over their own careers," said van Ginhoven, "and the book made it seem possible to me. Leigh Strimbeck and I formed WAM (Women's Action Movement) in 2009 to benefit women."

To raise money, van Ginhoven wrote 100 letters to family and friends, and enough of them contributed to stage the first production in 2010. Theater management chose not to pick a permanent theater site but to do productions in rented spaces

that fulfill their audience requirements, which range from 50 to 99 patrons. Three plays have been produced, and they plan a fourth for November of this year.

"We Canadians," said Ginhoven, with a glance at Taylor-Williams, "learn the rules, but we are both stubborn women who want to live and work in the Berkshires and hire local people and create a 'Berkshire atmosphere.'"

"We have no theater building plans, either," said Taylor-Williams. "Right now I just want a Wharton house, a relationship to Wharton's own home. We may form a board in the next year, but what we are most interested in right now is creating an artistic legacy that will benefit both us and the Mount."

The new work, "Autre Temps..." has been adapted by Dennis Krausnick from a Wharton short story and deals with "divorce, 1962, American-style."

As you can see from the picture, both women are as good looking as they are determined, and you can be sure that the determination will only grow.