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FEATURE FRIDAYS: Jane Anderson



Jane Anderson photo by Barbara Green

Jane Anderson is one of the most talented writers of our time. Period. From "Normal" with Jessica Lange to "Mad Men" to perhaps the most perfectly crafted story ever written for television, "If These Walls Could Talk 2", Jane uses words to speak to the heart of the human condition.

It is our honor today to feature Jane Anderson and her story of injustice....the story of her great aunt, whose life was pillaged, yet whose art still lives.

You will be spellbound....by Jane's mastery in telling the story, by the shocking events that befell Edith, and by the extraordinary expression that emanates from her paintings.

[I urge you to get involved in Jane's documentary on Edith.....read on.](#)

~ Diana



Edith Lake Wilkinson

I've been living with a profoundly gifted soul for the past fifty years of my life. She died when I was only three but her paintings hung on the walls of the house where I grew up.

You've never heard of Edith Lake Wilkinson. She disappeared in the prime of her artistic life in 1924, at the age of 57 when she was checked into the Sheppard Pratt asylum in Baltimore. At the time, Edith was still living with her companion Fannie on the Upper Westside. They'd been together for over twenty years but Fannie was listed on the back of her admittance card simply as "friend."



The fellow who checked her in was a lawyer who was in charge of her inheritance. Once Edith was put away, he started using her funds for his own enjoyment. Fannie passed away. The money in Edith's estate disappeared and she was moved into a state institution in West Virginia where she spent the last twenty-four years of her life locked up in a ward for incurables.



A painting class in Provincetown, c.1914

Forty years later, my mother was visiting the in-laws in Wheeling, West Virginia and found Edith's old trunks in their attic. When my mother opened those trunks she found dozens and dozens of Edith's light-drenched canvases tucked in with her moldering clothes. Having an eye for beautiful things, my mother asked my Aunt Betty if she could have some of the paintings and my aunt graciously told her to take her pick.



Provincetown, c.1920

Edith's paintings became the backdrop of my childhood. Her palette, her brush strokes, the quality of light in her landscapes became part of my own visual vocabulary. She taught me how to paint. When I was 20, I moved to New York City – the same age that Edith was when she left her home in Wheeling to study at the Art Student's League. Like Edith, I was an eccentric young woman pursuing a life in the arts.



Edith in 1920, sitting outside the studio of another Provincetown artist, Blanche Lazzell.

I went to Provincetown looking for traces of Edith where she spent summers filling her canvasses with that remarkable Cape Cod light. It was 1974, and armed with slides of Edith's



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work, I went from gallery to gallery, begging the owners to "Look! Look at these beautiful paintings!" No one much cared. She was an unknown and her art had no value. I took a long break from Edith. I had my own career as a writer to worry about. I packed up her work and moved to L.A.

in the Hollywood Hills, which I share with my spouse Tess and our son. Her paintings are a witness to my own happy life. I'm still productive and I'm very much loved. I have the life that Edith should have had.

And so I've taken up Edith's cause once again. But this time I have the miraculous tool of the Web. I created a site for Edith and word about her has spread:

www.EdithLakeWilkinson.com

Edith now has her champions in Provincetown who are eager to get her work recognized. In October she's having her first one-woman show in the place where she once lived and thrived as an artist.



And yes, we're now **making a documentary** about this journey to rescue Edith's work.

Here's to lifting all the lost and gifted souls of this world out of attics and closets and forgotten rooms. Here's to being seen.



Packed in a Trunk - Help us tell Edith's Story

Has it been painful to know that your great-aunt's life was unjustly smothered and wounded by her commitment?

I think that the word I would use is "unnerving" because by the grace of God, that never happened to me. Most of us who've pursued a life in the arts could be considered "off." Creative people walk around with a certain hypersensitivity that makes us emotionally vulnerable. Painters, writers, actors, musicians – we all have to be a bit nuts to do what we have to do.

Do you think that the fact that your great-aunt Edith had a female "companion" had anything to do with her commitment?

Of course, that's the first thing that I went to, when I found out that Edith was sharing her life with Fannie. Being gay was always considered a sickness. But when I did more research on Shepphard Pratt, the first asylum that she was committed to, I found out that the doctors there weren't at all homophobic – at least when it came to treating gay men. This was in the 1920's, when there was a sexual revolution going on. But the lawyer who escorted Edith to Shepphard Pratt and then proceeded to rip her off, definitely found their relationship suspect. I have a letter that he wrote to Edith telling her that he didn't think it was wise for her and Fannie to be in such "close and constant contact." He was clearly trying to separate them. The only clue I have about why she ended up at Shepphard Pratt is a one-word diagnosis on her admittance card: Paranoia. Hmmm, can we blame her for feeling that someone was out to get her?



Production still from "Packed in a Trunk" Executive Produced and Co-Directed by Jane Anderson

Why have you decided to make a documentary about Edith?

A lot of people have said to me, you're a screenwriter, why don't you make a film about Edith? That seems all wrong. I want the focus to be on Edith's art, not mine. And there're still so many unanswered questions about her life. You make a documentary to uncover a mystery. I've partnered with two wonderful documentary filmmakers, Barbara Green and Michelle Boyaner who have the skill and the artistry and the heart to do justice to Edith's story.

If you could ask Edith one thing, what would it be?

"When were you the happiest?"

And what do you think she would say?

"That moment when I would load my palette up with fresh paint and everything seemed possible."



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About this capture

DO THIS NOW ...

The Kickstarter Campaign to fund the documentary "Packed in a Trunk" ends July

24th. Get involved!

Packed in a Trunk: The Lost Work of Edith Lake Wilkinson

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Onward!

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