

Edinburgh Festival Fringe preview – The W.R.E.N.S Need You: An Edinburgh Rendezvous.

☒ At Venue 18, Sweet Grassmarket, City 1, August 4/28th, the engagingly alliterative Tiny Teapot Theatre ensemble premier Edinburgh born playwright, Anne McGravie's, [compelling drama 'Wrens'](#) (Women's Royal Navy Service). The production, drawing on McGravie's personal experiences, both explores and celebrates the camaraderie, emotions and binding loyalties of young women caught up in the maelstrom of World War 2.

It promises to be an embracing, certainly emotional, journey of reminiscence, where moments of nostalgia, astutely viewed through cracked, rose-tinted spectacles, bear insight into the life-changing experiences of those young women, many as young as seventeen on signing-up. For most of them it was first time away from home: a liberating experience, and not least in the belief that they too, like absent fathers and brothers could now do 'Their bit'.

Chatting to The Edinburgh Reporter, May Thomson (nee Kennedy) who is East Calder born and who spent her childhood in Glasgow, recalls with fondness and uniform pressed sharp detail her service in the Wrens when she was stationed at Portland Bill, Dorset, on ASDICS and ship to shore signals. A particular memory was the conspiratorial willingness to thwart the Customs & Excise sentry guards whose hatred was legion amongst both Wrens and ratings on shore-leave alike.

"Not being subject to the Naval Discipline Act, we 'Jennys' were free from the constant searches the ratings were subject to on leaving shore-base. We were complicit 'smugglers' of their duty-free cigarettes. Even more elicited, and therefore equally more fun, was to conceal bottles of 'sippers', the

collected rum rations tots saved during tours of duty that we would then hand over to the relieved ratings at the nearest pub. All, of course, in line with our patriotic duty to boost moral."

The initiation into otherwise rigid Navy discipline, the revelatory candour of barrack-room humour and the friendships that bound them, inform this incisive, emotive but never sentimental journey. Drawing on the musical sound-track that defined the wartime experience within a music hall atmosphere the play captures the essence of what a true Fringe show is all about. And what better location than the Grassmarket, steeped in Edinburgh history and mystery snuggled beneath the imposing Castle ramparts. It is planned for Annie McGrivie (now living in Chicago, but here for the premiere) to meet with fellow ex-Wrens after the show and share memories. A poignant reminder of the sacrifices made by their fellow Wrens [is commemorated](#) in Pilrig-St. Paul's, Leith, where the following abridged account relates that:-

"On the wall is a memorial to Madge Barns CP0 (Chief Petty Officer) who died during the SS Aguila disaster of 1941. On board the Aguila were twenty-two W.R.N.S., (Women's Royal Navy Service) the first batch of girls who had volunteered for cypher and wireless duties on the 'Rock'. Soon after midnight, the U-204 fired two torpedoes at the convoy and hitting the destroyer HMS Bath, She sank within three minutes drowning 83 of her crew. Another torpedo, this time from the U-201, hit the Aguila amidships sending her to the bottom in ninety seconds. There were only 16 survivors, leaving a death toll of 145. The dreadful, unbelievable truth, was that not one of the twenty two Wrens had survived."

It is worthy of note that Nicholas Monserrat pays homage to these women in a fictionalised, but equally graphic episode in

'The Cruel Sea'.