

THE DROWNING GIRLS

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Real. Provocative. Theatre.

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THE DROWNING GIRLS

By Beth Graham, Charlie Tomlinson, and Daniela Vlaskalic

Directed by Scott Palmer
October 13 - 31, 2016

CAST

Alice Autumn Buck
Bessie Jessi Walters*
Margaret Jessica Geffen**

CREW/PRODUCTION TEAM

Director Scott Palmer
Assistant Director Cassie Greer*
Stage Manager & Props Master Ephriam Harnsberger
Costume Designer Melissa Heller
Scenic Designer Megan Wilkerson
Lighting Designer & Technical Director Jim Ricks-White
Sound Designer Scott Palmer

The Playwright acknowledges the assistance of the
2007 Banff Playwrights Colony –

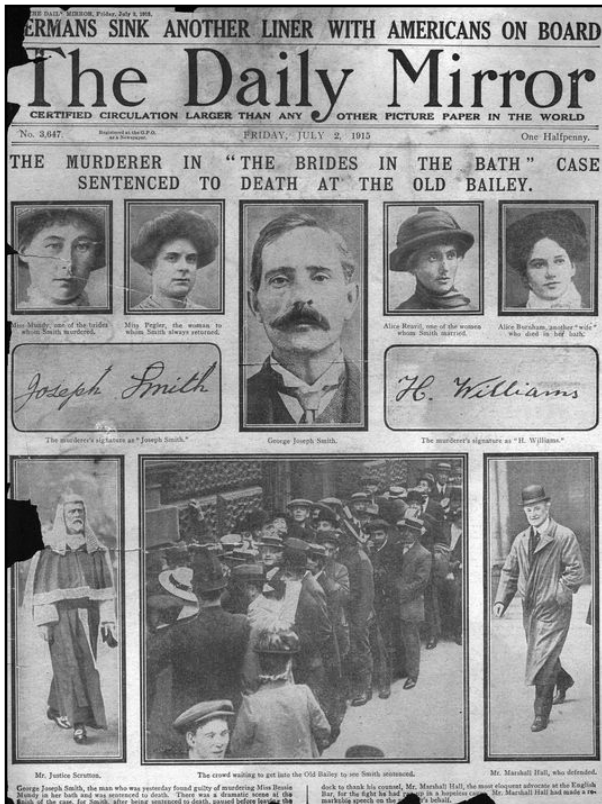
A partnership between the Canada Council for the Arts,
The Banff Center, and Alberta Theatre Projects

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*Member of the Bag&Baggage Resident Acting Company

**Bag&Baggage Associate Artist

I. INTRODUCTION



Bessie Mundy, Alice Burnham, and Margaret Lofty have two things in common: they were all married to George Joseph Smith and they are all dead. Surfacing from the bathtubs they were drowned in, the three breathless brides gather evidence against their womanizing, murderous husband by reliving the shocking events leading up to their deaths.

Reflecting on the misconceptions of love, married life, and the not-so-happily ever after, *The Drowning Girls* is both a breathtaking fantasia and a social critique, full of rich images, myriad characters, and lyrical language. *The Drowning Girls* premiered at Alberta Theatre Projects' 2008 PlayRites festival in Alberta, Canada, following an earlier, two-woman version that ran at the 1999 Edmonton Fringe.

The Drowning Girls at Bag&Baggage is a Pacific Northwest premiere, and is adapted by Beth Graham, Charlie Tomlinson, and Daniela Vlaskalic from actual transcripts from the trial of George Joseph Smith, the "Brides in the Bath" murderer in England at the beginning of the 20th Century.

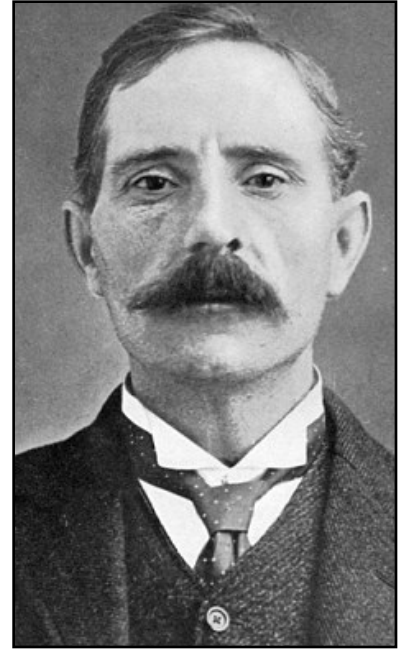


Jessica Geffen, Autumn Buck, and Jessi Walters play Margaret Lofty, Alice Burnham, and Bessie Mundy in Bag&Baggage's production of *The Drowning Girls*

II: GEORGE JOSEPH SMITH & HIS BRIDES

The renowned English serial killer and bigamist George Joseph Smith was born in Bethnal Green, London on January 11, 1872, to an insurance agent and his wife. Not much is known of his early life, but there is record of his being sent to a reformatory at Gravesend, Kent, at the age of nine, and later serving time for swindling and theft. In 1896, at the age of 24, he was imprisoned for 12 months for persuading a woman to steal from her employers, and using the proceeds to open a baker's shop in Leicester.

In 1898, following his release from prison, and under the alias Oliver George Love, he married 19-year-old Caroline Beatrice Thornhill in Leicester - the first of a string of marriages of varying legality. Caroline and George moved to London, where she was a maid for a number of employers, stealing from them for her husband. More stints in jail, various aliases, and six other bigamous marriages followed between 1899 and 1914 - most notably his marriage to Edith Peglar, using his legal name, in July of 1908. Edith is thought to be the only woman Smith ever truly loved, and though she never knew of her husband's activities when he was away from her, he always returned and sent money back to her.



In 1910, nearly at the end of all his resources, Smith met Bessie Mundy, the daughter of a deceased bank manager. Smith took up the alias Henry Williams, and he and Bessie married on August 26 of that year. After a rocky relationship - where Smith abrasively attempted to get money out of the Mundy family, accused Bessie of giving him a venereal disease and abandoned her for a time, made her see a doctor for purported fainting spells, and convinced Bessie to draw up a will leaving everything she had to him - she drowned mysteriously in her bath on July 13, 1912.



Bessie and "Henry"

Smith returned to Edith for a year, and the two traveled around the country, living off the money he had inherited from Bessie's death (or, as he had explained it to Edith, the money he had made in a stroke of luck acquiring and selling a Chinese image in Canada).

Smith left Edith at the beginning of October of 1913, again in need of more money, and headed to Southsea where he met Alice Burnham. Alice was quickly swept off of her feet, agreeing to marry George (as he called himself) by October 15. Alice's family - her father in particular - were wary of Smith and his charms, but Alice was adamant, and the two were married in the Portsmouth Registry Office on November 4, 1913. Shortly before the wedding, Alice had withdrawn all her money from the bank, and following the marriage, Smith again attempted to get more money out of his bride's family. He was unsuccessful, and Alice mysteriously drowned in her bath after a mere two weeks of marriage on December 12, 1913.

Smith again returned to Edith for most of 1914, until the late summer, when he again grew restless and in need of funds. He met Alice Reavil, a domestic servant in Bournemouth, at the beginning of September, telling her he was an artist who owned land in Canada. On September 17, Smith married this second Alice, under the name Charles Oliver James, and convinced her to withdraw all her money, collect all her valuables, and prepare for a move to Waterloo. After renting two rooms in Waterloo, Smith vanished, leaving Alice waiting to receive all her luggage and moving boxes, which never arrived.



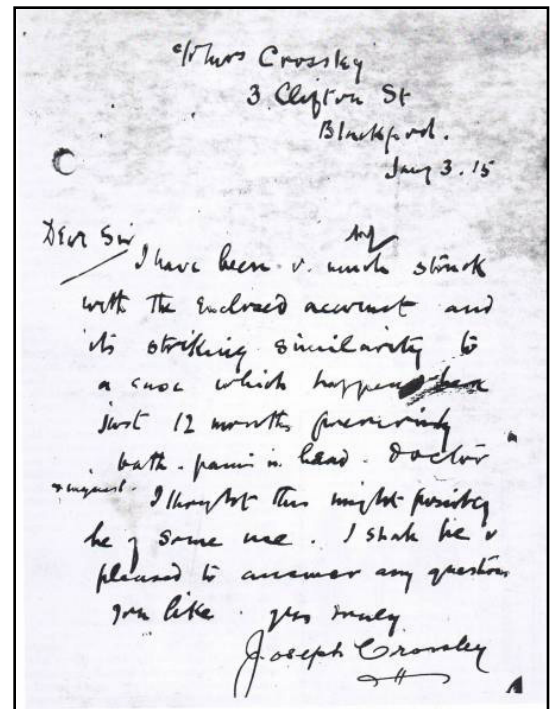
Edith Pegler

Back again with Edith for the last time in the fall of 1914, Smith told her he had been to a sale in London, and acquired some lady's clothing for her. During the next several months, whenever she inquired of his whereabouts or finances, he threatened her that "if [she] interfered with his business, [she] should never have another happy day, as the world is wide". Towards the end of the year, he told Edith that he "would have a run round again before Xmas with another 'young fellow' he had met in Clifton." This "young fellow" turned out to be Margaret Elizabeth Lofty.

Margaret Lofty was the spinster daughter of a late minister in Bristol who met John Lloyd, as Smith now named himself, at the end of November 1914. Though Margaret was not terribly enthusiastic about John, she was even less excited about becoming an old maid, and agreed to marry him after just a few days of acquaintance. Smith had persuaded her to take out a life insurance policy, and they wed on December 17. Immediately following the wedding, the two headed to London, where Margaret was found dead in her bath the next day.

In January 1915, Division Detective Inspector Arthur Neil received a letter from a Joseph Crossley, who owned a boarding house in Blackpool, Lancashire, and was writing on behalf of himself, his wife, and a Mr. Charles Burnham - the brother of Alice Brunham. Included with the letter were two newspaper clippings: one was from the News of the World dated before Christmas, 1914, about the death of Margaret Elizabeth Lloyd; the other contained the report of a coroner's inquest dated December 13, 1913, about a woman named Alice Smith, who had died suddenly in Crossley's boarding house in Blackpool. The police immediately began investigating the eerily similar deaths, and the striking resemblance between the descriptions of George Joseph Smith and John Lloyd.

Detective Neil asked the coroner not to issue a suspicious report of Margaret's death to the insurance company, counting on Smith to come in to claim the money from his late wife's policy. On February 1, Smith appeared at his lawyer's to check in on the process, where Neil met and apprehended him for questioning on suspicion of bigamy and murder; the pathologist Bernard Spilsbury was brought in to determine how the women died.



Joseph Crossley's letter to Detective Neil



Sir Bernard Spilsbury

Over the following weeks, Spilsbury had the bodies of Smith's victims exhumed, and newspaper reports about the "Brides in the Baths" began to appear. On February 8, the chief police officer of Herne Bay, a small seaside resort in Kent, sent Neil a report of another death - Bessie (Mundy) Williams - which was strikingly similar to the other two. Neil then sent photographs of Smith to Herne Bay for possible identification, and then went to Blackpool, where Spilsbury was conducting an autopsy of Alice Smith. The results of the investigation into the circumstances of Alice's death were the same as with Margaret: a lack of violence, every suggestion of instantaneous death, and little evidence of drowning. Upon examination of Bessie Williams, Spilsbury found one sure sign of drowning: the presence of goose pimples on the skin. As with the other two deaths, the tub in which Bessie had died was sent to London.

Neil hired several experienced female divers of the same size and build as the victims. He tried to push them underwater by force but there would be inevitable signs of struggle. Neil then unexpectedly pulled the feet of one of the divers, and her head glided underwater before she knew what happened. Suddenly Neil saw that the woman was no longer moving. He quickly pulled her out of the tub and it took him and a doctor over half an hour to revive her. When she came to, she related that the only thing she remembered was the rush of water before she lost consciousness. Thus was Spilsbury's theory confirmed.

George Joseph Smith was charged for the murders of Bessie Williams, Alice Smith, and Margaret Lloyd on March 23, 1915, and his trial began on June 22 at the Old Bailey. Testimony was conducted until July 1, when it took the jury only 20 minutes to find him guilty. Smith was then sentenced to death, and hanged in Maidstone Prison on August 13, 1915.

As well as being widely reported in the media, the “Brides in the Baths” case was significant in the history of forensic pathology and detection. It was also one of the first cases in which similarities between connected crimes were used to prove deliberation - a technique used in subsequent prosecutions.

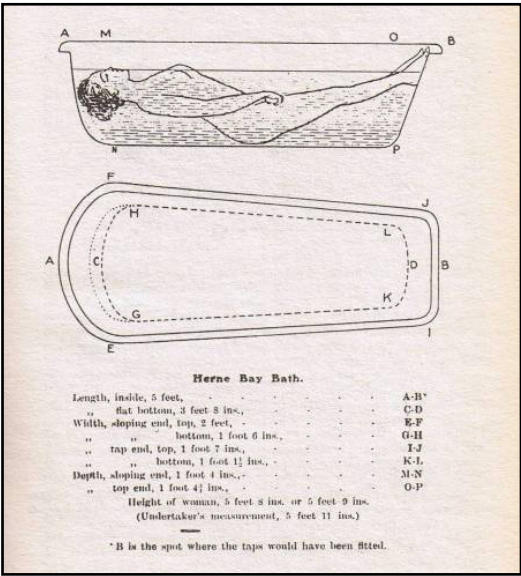


diagram of the Herne Bay bath, in which Bessie was murdered



Beatrice Constance Annie Mundy
age 33



Alice Burnham
age 26



Margaret Elizabeth Lofty
age 38

III: THE PLAYWRIGHTS - BETH GRAHAM, CHARLIE TOMLINSON, AND DANIELA VLASKALIC



Beth Graham

Beth Graham is an actor and playwright, based in Edmonton, Alberta. Born in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, and growing up in Cochrane, Alberta, Graham studied acting at the University of Alberta, and strives to undertake challenging issues and ideas in her theatre work. She is a member of The Playwright's Forum at the Citadel Theatre, and writer-in-residence at Workshop West Theatre.

Daniela Vlaskalic is an actor and playwright currently based in Toronto, where she formed The Theatre Department company with Ron Pederson in 2012. She studied acting at the University of Alberta, and excels at playing intelligent, independent women with an emotional range that makes a strong impact on the audience. Vlaskalic has been nominated twice for a Betty Mitchell Award, for her work in *Drama: Pilot Episode* and *God of Carnage*.

Charlie Tomlinson is a teacher/director/actor/playwright who lives in St John's, Newfoundland. He is the former artistic director of c2c theatre; he has worked and collaborated at theatres all across Canada, from Newfoundland to the Yukon, and has taught in Ontario, Alberta, and Newfoundland.

Graham and Vlaskalic met in the BFA acting program at the University of Alberta in the late 1990s, and together they founded Bent Out Of Shape Productions - a company dedicated to:

the collaboration between creation based artists in voicing ideas and issues that are important to them and challenge their community; the celebration of the freedom of expression that we have today by looking at examples of oppression in history; the creation of strong roles for women in the theatre

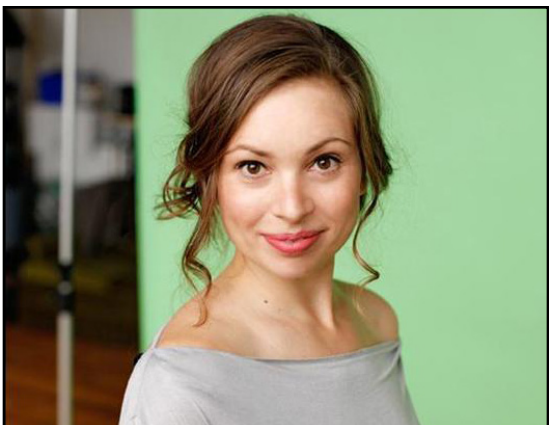


Charlie Tomlinson

Graham and Vlaskalic graduated in 1998, and originally created *The Drowning Girls* for the 1999 Edmonton Fringe Festival (this version featuring only two characters) along with Tomlinson, who was teaching at Alberta at that time. Intrigued by the history of the "Brides in the Baths" murders, Graham, Vlaskalic, and Tomlinson began to explore the question of how George Joseph Smith could possibly have gotten away with the same crime - three times in a row.

In a 2008 interview with Edmonton's *Vue Weekly* (on the eve of their remount of *The Drowning Girls* - this time fleshed out with all three of Smith's victims), Graham and Vlaskalic explain their process:

As Vlaskalic and Graham came to realize, at least part of the reason is explainable by the time: this was, obviously, a very different time for women, and the fact all three were getting dangerously close to old maid status no doubt helped Smith's cause.



Daniela Vlaskalic

"For these women at the time, being an old maid was basically being thought of as superfluous, of not really mattering unless you had a husband," explains Graham. "In a lot of ways that made them ripe for the pickings for George."

"It became more about society, and women in society at the time: really their only way to find some power in life was to get married," agrees Vlaskalic. "Being married meant everything then, and we really began to understand their mental state: it's really not so cut-and-dry."

Of course, though social mores at the time contributed, both Vlaskalic and Graham also point out that there's also a lot of truth to the old adage that love is blind. Though obviously neither has found themselves in quite the same position as the brides in the bath, certainly everyone has overlooked something fairly crucial.

"We did ask each other how this could have happened, but then we kind of realized, you know, how many relationships we've all had where, after the fact, it's just like, 'Why didn't I see that?'" explains Graham. "And that's really what it's kind of about, it's a bit of a cautionary tale for people who are thinking of falling in love or who are in love: love is blind."

"We often don't see the foibles and the flaws of the people we love, for whatever reason," Vlaskalic admits. "It's a bit of a mystery, but it serves a purpose, in a way: if you could only see the faults of people, you might never love anyone. It's the nature of love: it's blind, and it has to be."



Vlaskalic (left) and Graham (right) along with Natascha Girgis (center) in Tarragon Theatre's 2009 production of The Drowning Girls

Vue Weekly
March 13, 2008



Jessi Walters as Bessie Mundy in Bag&Baggage's production of The Drowning Girls



Jessica Geffen as Margaret Lofty in Bag&Baggage's production of The Drowning Girls



◀ *Autumn Buck as Alice Burnham in Bag&Baggage's production of The Drowning Girls*

IV. OUR PRODUCTION: NOTES FROM SCOTT PALMER



Scott Palmer

How could Smith get away with it? At least three times? At least three women? Three recent brides? Three drownings in nearly identical circumstances? Was it because criminal investigative techniques were so much more primitive in the late 1800s? Possibly.

The Daily Mail in the UK poses a different possibility. In April of 2010, *The Daily Mail*, in an ongoing series detailing some of the UK's most horrific mass murderers, wrote, "In the 1890s, large numbers of young men were emigrating to the colonies, which left British females outnumbering men by more than half a million by 1910. The newspapers of the day were full of stories about women who could not find husbands."

These "spinsters," as they were viciously named by the popular media, were largely poor and working-class women with little to no hope for financial advancement. At a time when women were not able to find employment beyond being servants, housekeepers, or the like, the prospect of a life of poverty was not only a possibility, it was the most likely outcome. In a culture that valued being a wife and mother as the most noble of callings to which a woman could aspire, the lack of potential mates was likely panic inducing.

And it was in this environment that George Smith hunted for his victims. *The Daily Mail* continues, "Such spinsters were perfect prey for Smith, a smooth-talking spiv with a slim, muscular physique and a penchant for flashy gold rings and brightly-colored bow-ties. He prowled seafronts and parks in his search for lonely and vulnerable females, mesmerizing them with his deep-set grey eyes."



the wax figure of George Joseph Smith that appeared in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's for decades following his death

Backstage.com's recent coverage of a production of *The Drowning Girls* says,



George Joseph Smith on trial at the Old Bailey

George Joseph Smith was working a ghastly racket. Posing as a man of independent means, he would court the daughters of wealthy families and those who were of little means. Before the wedding he would have the lady's will and finances put into order, leaving him the sole beneficiary in the event of her untimely death. Then—sometimes a few years after the wedding, sometimes just a single day later—he drowned his new wife in a bathtub, took the money, and ran. Smith accomplished this gruesome scam at least three times within three years, leading to his conviction and execution.

The Brides In the Baths murders are among the most notorious in all of England's history, and follow a tragically familiar narrative. Young women pressured by society to marry; a handsome gentleman with promises of love and a comfortable lifestyle; a cultural predilection to disbelieve women's stories of abuse; a dismissive attitude towards the value of a woman's life; and a justice system inclined to side with men over women. A tale as old as time, really.

But in this remarkable reimagining of the deaths and lives of Alice, Bessie, and Margaret, the writers of *The Drowning Girls* do more than just illuminate sexism and the prevalence of violence against women; they also give the victims of this violence a voice, a chance to not only tell their stories but explain their choices, reflect on their lives, prove their cases, and to meet each other in a macabre sisterhood.

1914 Marriage solemnized at		in the District of		in the County of		Bath and Somerset	
No.	When Married	Name and Surname	Age	Condition	Rank or Profession	Residence at the time of Marriage	Father's Name and Surname
200	19th	John Lloyd	38	Bachelor	Land Agent	14, Stanley Road, Bath	John Arthur Lloyd
		Margaret Elizabeth Lofty	38	Spinster		14, Stanley Road, Bath	Henry Lofty

Married in the Registrar's Office according to the solemnized Ceremonies of the

The Marriage was solemnized before us

John Lloyd

Margaret Elizabeth Lofty

Thomas Holloway

Fanny Holloway

Arthur Edward Holloway

1st Registrar

certificate of the 1914 marriage of Margaret Elizabeth Lofty and John Lloyd



the July 2, 1915 front page of London's Daily Sketch

When I first read *The Drowning Girls* I knew immediately that Bag&Baggage should produce the show. Not only is it based on the actual court transcripts of the trial of George Smith, but it was also written in such a way as to be almost Shakespearean in poetic style. Without question, *The Drowning Girls* is unique in the performance history of the company. Written by contemporary female playwrights from Canada, in a style that is largely non-realistic and hauntingly simple, the story is one of tragedy and celebration; part cautionary tale, part courtroom drama, and part love story. *The Drowning Girls* gripped me while I read it. Given the remarkable women who work with this company, as actors and as artists, it was a simple decision to ask those artists to give the victims of George Smith the chance to live, breathe, laugh, love, warn, and fight again. Maybe in this sisterhood, we can all find strength together.



◀ Vlaskalic, Girgis, and Graham in Tarragon Theatre's 2009 production of *The Drowning Girls*

V. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & WRITING ACTIVITIES

Before you see the show:

1. Do we, in the United States in 2016, have any similarities to the dismissive, disbelieving attitude towards women and their stories of abuse that was prevalent in early 20th Century England? How has our society changed, and how has it stayed the same?
2. What do you think the saying “love is blind” really means?
3. What does it mean to “have a voice”? How is having a voice different for men and for women? For minorities? For the young? For the elderly?

After you see the show:

4. *The Drowning Girls* is not a piece of realism, yet is telling a real-life story. What are the benefits of this non-realistic type of storytelling? What are the drawbacks?
5. What are the major similarities between Bessie, Alice, and Margaret? What are the major differences? Why do you think each of them was targeted by George Joseph Smith?
6. In the show you saw, how is the physical reality of the world of the dead different from the physical reality of the world of the living? How would you choose to represent this difference if you were staging the play?
7. There are many pieces of imagery and physical metaphor in the show. Name three that you noticed, and give your personal response to each of them.
8. Why do you think the story of *The Drowning Girls* is an important one for us to tell?
9. Imagine that you have been commissioned to write a play about a historical event. What event would you choose, and from whose perspective would you decide to tell the story? Explain your choices.
10. Bessie, Alice, and Margaret each have a monologue in which they remember and try to process falling in love with George/Henry/John. Write a narrative monologue about an important moment in your life, taking into account the way you felt at that time, as well as things you have experienced and discovered after the fact.

VI. SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

On George Joseph Smith and the Brides in the Bath:

“The Brides on the Bath Homepage: The Case of George Joseph Smith” on *Networked Knowledge*: <http://netk.net.au/BridesInTheBathHome.asp>

“Brides in the Bath Murders” on the website of the London Metropolitan Police: <http://content.met.police.uk/Article/Brides-in-the-Bath-Murders/1400015481775/1400015481775>

“The brides in the bath murders” by Leo McKinstry for *Express*, August 13, 2015: <http://www.express.co.uk/comment/columnists/leo-mckinstry/598122/The-brides-in-the-bath-murders>

“Solved: How the brides in the bath died at the hands of their ruthless womanising husband” by David Leafe for *The Daily Mail*, April 22, 2010: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1267913/Solved-How-brides-bath-died-hands-ruthless-womaniser.html>

“The Brides in the Bath” from the Crime Library of the *St. Alban’s & Harpenden Review*: <http://www.stalbansreview.co.uk/nostalgia/crimelibrary/georgejosephsmith/bridesinthebath/>

“Bigamy, Betrayal and Bathtubs – The Story of George Joseph Smith (for Casebook: Classic Crime)” on the blog of Ben Johnson: True Crime and Local History – Author and Columnist: <https://benjohnson.org/2015/11/21/bigamy-betrayal-and-bathtubs-the-story-of-george-joseph-smith-for-casebook-classic-crime/>

George Joseph Smith on *Murderpedia*: <http://murderpedia.org/male.S/s/smith-george-joseph.htm>

To watch:

Crime Museum UK, Season 1, Episode 10: Brides In The Bath: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBGwKerh9ns>

Crime Channel - Documentary: Brides in the Bath: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3QGFNLLwdY>

On *The Drowning Girls* and its playwrights:

Beth Graham on the Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia: <http://www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Graham%2C%20Beth>

Daniela Vlaskalic on the Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia: <http://www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Vlaskalic%2C%20Daniela>

Charlie Tomlinson on Playwrights Canada Press: <http://www.playwrightscanada.com/index.php/charlie-tomlinson.html>

“The Drowning Girls” by David Berry for *Vue Weekly*, March 13, 2008: http://www.vueweekly.com/the_drowning_girls_2/

Featured Playwright Q & A with Beth Graham on Playwrights Guild of Canada: <https://www.playwrightsguild.ca/news/featured-playwright-q-beth-graham>