

# **I Love You Like Hell**

Based on the lives of  
Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven  
&  
Frederick Philip Grove

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing

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## ABSTRACT

My full-length thesis play, *I Love You Like Hell*, about the romance, marriage, subsequent separation, and ultimate fate of the modernist literary figures Frederick Philip Grove and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, was borne of a desire to investigate, understand, and present their remarkable histories, and the motivation for their incredible actions, in dramatic form.

To capture the unique qualities of these real and eccentric people, required that I use techniques closely related to visual arts. The play is a form of collage: a technique of art production, where the artwork is made from an assemblage of different forms, thus creating a new whole. For as well as writing myself, and using portions of the actual writing of my subjects, the requirements of the concept of continuous action inspired the idea of turning Freytag-Loringhoven's ready-made sculpture objects into the set and creating some of my own.

Freytag-Loringhoven is consistently dubbed as a marginal figure in the New York dada scene and Duchamp is firmly planted as the inventor of ready-made art. But there is compelling evidence Freytag-Loringhoven was at the forefront of this movement, and further, that she was the artist behind the famous ready-made urinal piece called 'Fountain', which was voted the most influential artwork of all time.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Sheri Benning. I am privileged to have had the opportunity to work with you over this two year program. Your precise, sensitive critique and editorial suggestions have deepened and expanded my entire writing process. I also wish to acknowledge my mentor, Micheline Chevrier, whose expertise was key in guiding me to find my path and my voice. I thank the MFA in Writing programme director, Dr. Jeanette Lynes, who was always a great resource and support.

Thank you to my classmates: Taidgh Lynch, Jacklyn Morken, Toni Hiatt, Bonnie Heilman, and Allie McFarland. You have all inspired me.

Special appreciation goes to my chosen family: Graham, Lupe, Alé, and Angel Ashmore-Mendoza, who kept the home fires burning and cared for Chocko, Tulo, and Perriwinkle Gray; Minnie Gray, constant companion, dearest love, we are the original two; support-extraordinaire Melanie Wight, who knows that one person can make all the difference.

I acknowledge the support of the University of Saskatchewan College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, the University of Saskatchewan Interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and Creativity, the Manitoba Arts Council, and the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate SSHRC Master's Program. These scholarship and bursary funds allowed the completion of my MFA degree.

The presenting of these pieces together, the collage of original writing and my re-visioning of Freytag-Loringhoven's sculpture with new pieces of found object, endow them all with a new existence, a new meaning. The play itself functions as a ready-made work of art, consisting of a new and old text, new and old sculpture, authored by the play's subjects and its contemporary author. Freytag-Loringhoven's spirit of unconventional art creation was an inspiration for this playwright. This is fitting, as I believe, along with many others, that Freytag-Loringhoven von Freytag-Loringhoven was the pioneer of ready-made art.

DEDICATION

For Melanie

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## ARTIST STATEMENT: *I Love You Like Hell*

My full-length thesis play is about the romance, marriage, subsequent separation, and ultimate fate of the modernist literary figures Frederick Philip Grove and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. I wanted to investigate, understand and present their remarkable histories, and the motivation for their incredible actions, in dramatic form. Some of the challenges I encountered included finding a focus for a vast and strange history that held many gaps due to both misinformation and a lack of documentation, and the need to capture two unusual characters with distinctive voices. Further, as my research revealed the injustices of attribution Freytag-Loringhoven experienced as an artist, I eventually discovered a creative solution to celebrate her sculpture through the act of playwrighting. In essence, the creation of this play placed me alongside my subject Freytag-Loringhoven and I became, in a sense, a ready-made or found object artist.

The bedrock for the play was a discovery. I was amazed to find, in my home province, that the University of Manitoba Archives contained some of the German-born avant-garde artist and dadaist poet Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven fonds. Freytag-Loringhoven's connection to Manitoba was through Frederick Philip Grove, who was also well represented in the archives. Grove is often credited with writing the first modern Canadian novel, *Settlers of the Marsh*. He married a Mennonite woman, Catherine Wiens, when he first arrived in Manitoba and became a schoolteacher. It was his secret that when this wedding to Wiens took place, he was already married. Grove won the Governor General's Award for his autobiography *In Search of Myself* (1946).



Freytag-Loringhoven was a poet and considered the mother of American dada visual and performance art. She was a major influence on American male modernist artists such as Marcel Duchamp. She is known as Baroness because of her brief marriage to Baron Leopold von Freytag-Loringhoven, whom she married after she had been abandoned by Grove.

Grove and Freytag-Loringhoven were married to each other, unlikely as it seems. They were German-born, and circulated in the cosmopolitan artistic circles of Europe. When Grove and the Baroness met, she was married to architect August Endell, and Grove was a participant in gay literary circles. The story of how they married, came to North America and parted ways, and radically re-invented themselves is a fascinating literary detective story, first uncovered by Douglas Spettigue in his 1973 exposé of *In Search of Myself*. In his book, *FPG: The European Years*, Spettigue revealed Grove's autobiography to be a work of fiction.

In the next few decades, scholars pieced together the dramatic "true stories" of Grove and the Freytag-Loringhoven. Their comprehensive biographies are still not generally known -- and seemingly, can never be known. Some online searches do not even connect Grove and the Freytag-Loringhoven, and only mention Grove's marriage to Catherine Wiens.

While the separate personal and artistic lives of Grove and Freytag-Loringhoven have been extensively documented and artistically depicted, their personal relationship has mostly been overlooked. And it was this aspect of their lives, from the time they met and married, and emigrated to the US (under false passports, after staging Grove's suicide) that initially fascinated me. During this time, they tried to run a Kentucky potato

farm, failed, and eventually separated. I wanted to explore the influences they exerted on each other in developing their changing queer and artistic identities. Their lives were in a constant state of flux, innately theatrical, which presented as ideal material for the stage. I began to research.

Feeling the pressure inherent to depicting real people, I made an initial attempt at dramatizing their story with a draft that portrayed only well-documented facts within a strictly chronological timeline. My logic behind this choice was that I wanted the audience to fully understand the origins of Grove and Freytag-Loringhoven's eccentricities, so they would not be alienated by their behaviour. For this reason, I felt I had to place the characters firmly where their psyches were formed, within the impactful events of their earliest childhood. The debt and despair of Grove's parents, the disappearance and (likely) murder of his beloved sister, the abuse Freytag-Loringhoven and her mother endured from the family patriarch, and her mother's agonizing death: these details would make an audience empathize with their outrageous and destructive actions. But after much research and writing, I had to face the fact that this approach needed to be abandoned. Freytag-Loringhoven and Grove's lives depicted factually would insist the play were of an unruly length. To complicate matters, there were important details missing from their stories. For example, numerous sources reported that Grove and Freytag-Loringhoven staged Grove's suicide to escape his debt in Germany, but the actual details of how they accomplished this important event remain unknown, or at least beyond my discovery. As much as I wanted to contain their lives to explain them, I was forced to admit that task was out of my grasp. Fiction would have to take over.

Eventually, I emerged from my research and the labyrinthine details of my topic to read Janet Munsil's play, *Emphysema: A Love Story*. This play was inspired by the theatre critic Kenneth Tynan's experience of tracking down and interviewing silent movie cinematic legend Louise Brooks in the 1970s. Both Tynan and Brooks were dying of emphysema, and the play is a tribute to cinema while being a meditation on death and sex. Munsil's work inspired me to explode the linear path I'd chosen, and boldly move away from biography into another way of presenting. And so, my approach to the writing of the play began to shift.

On the advice of my mentor, I embraced the freedom to dig deeply into what moved me personally about the story of Freytag-Loringhoven and Grove. Primarily, I realized I needed to understand what precisely about this subject matter was meaningful to me, beyond its obvious draw as a good story. The answer was waiting. As a life-long freelance theatre artist, I know there is no shortage of women working in the arts, but the numbers mask inequalities. As a woman who has straddled the visual, performance, and literary arts during her career, the very issues with success and vulnerability that Freytag-Loringhoven encountered are ones with which I and my female contemporaries continue to struggle. Freytag-Loringhoven's valiant persistence to create art despite difficult circumstances moved me. Grove's story is also poignant. He wrote because he had an innate drive to write, but his struggles with identity and money were lifelong. Thus, poverty in the arts became a major theme.

I was also deeply affected by Freytag-Loringhoven and Grove's disparate fates. I examined what happened to each of them. Freytag-Loringhoven made her way from Germany to Kentucky to New York, Berlin and ultimately Paris, and Frederick to

Manitoba and Ontario, Canada. Clearly, although the life of any artist is precarious, Grove's adopted heterosexuality and traditional marriage offered him protection that Freytag-Loringhoven did not have. Grove died in 1948 on his estate in Simcoe, Ontario, and she in 1927 from gas suffocation, penniless, in Paris. He had respectability in his lifetime, she did not. Their story perfectly encapsulates how female artists earn less, progress more slowly, have lower profiles, and are more vulnerable than their male counterparts. Through analyzing my personal connection to the material, I had my first real breakthrough. Instead of biography, the theme of the vulnerability of women in the arts would inform the dramatic arc of the story.

Further, once I made the conscious choice that the play would add to the existing literary scholarship by dramatizing their once-hidden history in a less-than-documentary fashion, I began to fully embrace the idea that I could fictionalize and embroider the parts of their tales that were unknowable. I considered Munsil's use of film projection and the embellishment of her subject's actual documented meeting, and found inspiration. Though I still worked with facts, I used Freytag-Loringhoven's actual documented dreams as source material, which to me are clear allegories of her past trauma. Grove's papers, however, provided no such dream material. I delved into Grove's prose writing and noted how his characters could be read as proxies for himself and Freytag-Loringhoven, a practice begun with their roman à clef, *Fanny Essler*. *Settlers of the Marsh* is a novel about an emphatically blameless farmer's marriage to a Mrs. Vogel, whom he comes to believe is a degenerate who has tricked him in to marriage. The tale appears to align with the disintegration of their real-life marriage on the Kentucky potato farm. Grove writes:

He saw her dimly. In this conflict of two human natures, such trifles such as her appearance, the exaggeration of her make-up – too absurd to be taken notice of – angered him. He would have liked to strip all that costly tinsel of her, with one rough touch to wipe paint and powder down, so she would stand there, the bare, ugly, life-worn specimen of humanity she appeared to him to be under that mask. He might have pitied her then (198).

One can see Grove in these works too, portraying himself in relationship as Niels the wise, though unfairly tricked, male, who always rises above the baseness of Vogel (or Freytag-Loringhoven). Further, he looks down on Vogel with a sneer, as she is humiliated, belittled, and finally killed off. In the following segment from *Settlers*, Grove appears to abdicate any responsibility toward Freytag-Loringhoven, portraying himself as the seduced innocent:

Something was still stirred in him by this woman...something low, disgraceful. In spite of his twenty-nine years he was not experienced enough to know that this something would have been stirred in him by any woman...And this was an artful woman: artful enough not to speak (105-106).

In real life, Grove abandons Freytag-Loringhoven on their farm, and they never see each other again. By reading *Settlers of the Marsh*, I discovered that Grove's fiction could be a pathway into his inner life that he hid so well. It was possible to surmise some of his justification for the dramatic abandonment of his wife of ten years, Freytag-Loringhoven. This revelation of motivation would be invaluable to me as a dramatist. But the investigation of their words became a springboard toward a new process.

Both Freytag-Loringhoven and Grove were artists and creating art was intrinsic to their existence. Using their own creative writing, both prose and poetry, was one way of bringing the essence of their relationship to the stage. I began to weave their highly distinctive voices, through their original text, into my play. At first, I was reticent about doing this. I felt as a writer I was a failure if I couldn't re-create their voices completely on my own. But when I began to experiment with incorporating their own words into my work, their sounds and syntax became a rich resource for the creation of my own text. In the following section of my play, I use a combination of Grove's text from *Settlers of the Marsh* describing the protagonist's' inner feelings in combination with my own text, as I attempt to express his inner workings at play in regards to his abandonment of Elsa. Of the result, I particularly liked the notion of Felix adopting another persona, disassociating himself from the action while he cuts the umbilical cord from Elsa and deals his marriage this death blow:

FELIX: Twice I have started life. Twice I have failed. Now I start a third time. So Niels sold all he had and gave to the poor, keeping only such raiment as was needed for his journey, and he girded himself, then departed. He travelled all through this land, he went into the wilderness. And he at last became a man. A ten-foot man!

I discovered the more I read and spoke their actual written words aloud, the more I could generate dialogue that approached the style of their written voices. Freely using their own words to mix with and inspire my dialogue became my practice, their brightly coloured strands enhancing my own stitches. And just as Munsil used the words of Brooks and Tynan in combination with her own words, I have credited Freytag-Loringhoven and Grove's written contributions to the play.

When I completed a functioning draft, what was readily apparent to me was how Freytag-Loringhoven and Grove's story arcs were vibrant and active until their lives came to devastating and fatal halts. Their frenetic energy informed and inspired the form, and the direction of the next pass of the script.

I went back and eliminated traditional scene beginnings and endings, and merged each scene into the next through described actor movement. The characters rarely stopped moving. I also found it appropriate to continue with the idea of blending the two characters' actions together, even when they were separated. These alternate scenes emphasized their creative energy and how they still fed off each other in spirit, despite being separated physically. When Grove moves into his Manitoba period, although he is in a form of stasis while he is stuck in despised locations and lodgings, his imaginative life is in perhaps its most active phase. He is obsessively engaged in writing. As well, at this point, the legacy of the memory of Freytag-Loringhoven and her incredible life-force is now infusing his memory:

FELIX: The only thing that matters is to be a person who lives for the sake of living, not to acquire, but to be. Just...to be. I am reminded of someone, Catherine. Someone who just wanted to be.

While Grove is working and wooing in Canada, Freytag-Loringhoven is fighting to survive, and is still driven to create, perhaps in defiance of Grove:

ELSA: I would have wanted my biography to be read by that Felix Paul Greve.

When they come to the end of their lives, and they can move no further, this is the only point in the script where Freytag-Loringhoven and Grove physically stop their movement and are frozen into place. The end of the play swiftly follows.

My initial concept for the play was to write strictly alternate scenes of Grove and Freytag-Loringhoven's life stories. Structurally, I believed that parallel scenes of the two artists would most show how vulnerable Freytag-Loringhoven was as a single woman artist living and working in the early 20th century. I also wanted to show how vulnerable artists are generally, regardless of gender, and I felt this approach would work to depict this aspect of Grove's story as well. I believed both characters would carry equal significance.

However, Freytag-Loringhoven took the play over. Although Grove remains a major character, I found the play could not live in parallel scenes. Freytag-Loringhoven was always and to the end actively engaged in solving her own mystery, bravely investigating her life history, through her work, and finding new ways of expressing herself with her own body as art. As Grove progressed in his story, he found ways to eke out the time and space to write as was his true calling, but he did this by using his wife Catherine as the primary breadwinner. He denied his bisexuality, and he used subterfuge: the adoption of the fictional persona Fred Grove. Freytag-Loringhoven, with her attitude of unflinching honesty, was the more active and dynamic of the two. Her honesty was the muscle that gained her the forefront. She suffered injustices, not only as an artist struggling to create, but also as a woman-artist. Freytag-Loringhoven was consistently forced out of validity in the art world and blocked from being an individual who earns money and is recognized for her contributions. This touched me in a way that Grove's story never did.

As spirited as she was, Freytag-Loringhoven was a victim of a common affliction for female artists: they are often unrecognized, and their work and ideas credited to men.



For example, consider Lee Krasner, married to Jackson Pollock. Her *Little Image* series, begun in 1946, incorporated dots and drips of paint which inspired Pollock's now famous action painting of the same period (Mendelsohn). Action Painting is a term first used in 1952 by the American critic Harold Rosenberg. According to Rosenberg, action-painting gave complete freedom to the painter's creative impulses, and made the act of painting more important than the work itself. This view echoed that of abstract expressionists like Pollock, Franz Kline and Willem De Kooning who had long championed the notion that painting was an arena in which the artist was engaged in a spontaneous creative struggle. Olivia Comstock writes, "Abstract Expressionism is characterized by a group of mainly male artists who are presented as extremely macho, hyper-masculine, and Western heroes" (Comstock). Lee Krasner was eclipsed by male artists in this discussion of a technique that she appears to have pioneered. Krasner's own technique is inched out of her grasp and branded as something she cannot hold: masculine.

Like Krasner and countless other female artists before her, Freytag-Loringhoven was ignored, diminished, and the work itself, misattributed. The very definition of action painting, that spontaneous creative struggle, following one's impulses, is an articulation of how Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven chose to live her life. To this day, Freytag-Loringhoven is consistently dubbed as a marginal figure in the New York dada scene while Duchamp is firmly planted as the inventor of ready-made art. But there is compelling evidence Freytag-Loringhoven was at the forefront of this movement, and further, that she was the artist behind the famous ready-made urinal piece called 'Fountain' (Hustvedt).

The ready-made sculpture *Fountain* was submitted to the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists but was considered indecent, and its presence at the exhibition caused a major scandal. But the act of presenting a urinal as a work of art became legend, and *Fountain* was recently voted the most influential artwork of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hustvedt's article recounts how on 11 April 1917 Duchamp wrote to his sister Suzanne and said that, "One of my female friends who had adopted the pseudonym Richard Mutt sent me a porcelain urinal as a sculpture; since there was nothing indecent about it, there was no reason to reject it". (Duchamp) The urinal was signed, 'R. Mutt'. At that time Freytag-Loringhoven was angry about the lack of content in art by her contemporaries in New York, anti-German sentiment, and her own poverty. 'Armut' is the German word for poverty. The urinal is highly characteristic of Freytag-Loringhoven's other ready-made pieces: "...base, crude, confrontational and funny" (Hustvedt). It is very likely this was her work. And yet, she was never credited for it, and her other radical readymade work is not well known, though as Gammel writes in *Baroness Elsa*, she was creating ready-mades, "...early as 1913, two years before the arrival of Duchamp and Picabia, the Baroness appropriated an everyday art object as art, challenging Western art concepts...." (161). Just like the Krasner technique became masculine, so too the ready-mades became the domain of men. I knew *Fountain* had to be part of the play.

As I imagined how I could stage the use of it, I came to the concept of having the urinal ever-present on stage to counter-act the frustrating invisibility of her legacy. And during the course of my research, as I learned more and more about her ready-mades, I discovered how useful her work could be. The set could be not only be an homage to her

artistry, but also the pieces could be useful in the staging of the play, serving many theatrical needs. For example, Freytag-Loringhoven's rusty ring ready-made was an ideal symbol for her marriage to the Baron, and could be used physically by the actors in several circumstances. I became inspired, and added my own ready-mades, the bicycle, umbrella and the slide, to be permanent parts of the set and add to the story.

In this way, all the elements of the play slowly commingled. The choice of presenting these pieces together: the collage of original writing and a re-visioning of Freytag-Loringhoven's sculpture, with new chosen pieces of found object, endowed them all with a new existence, a new meaning. The play itself becomes a kind of ready-made work.

This is fitting, as I believe, along with many others, that Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven was the pioneer of ready-made art (Thill). Jean Cocteau said, "Genius, in Art, consists of knowing how far you may go too far" (163). For Freytag-Loringhoven, as Gammel wrote, "...there was no going too far" (252). I left behind any initial qualm I had about collaging the writing of Grove and Freytag-Loringhoven with my own writing because the result contributed to a new whole.

My doubts were dispelled by the guiding force of my subject Freytag-Loringhoven and her free spirit, for as she was quoted in *Baroness Elsa*, "Why should I – proud engineer – be ashamed of my machinery?" (252)

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