



Run Nawrocki Run! raises funds for Ukrainian refugees

## Description

# Veteran playwright Norman Nawrocki speaks about his play and passion for the theatre

By Irwin Rapoport

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To commemorate the **anniversary of the end of Canada's WWI internment of Ukrainians** coast-to-coast on **June 20**, and **World Refugee Day**, **Les Pages Noires Productions** and **Babushka Theatre** are presenting ***Run Nawrocki Run! Escape from Banff Prison***, a play written and performed by **Norman Nawrocki**. While Norman wrote the play, its music was composed by Norman and his sister, **Vivian Nawrocki**.

The play will be presented online from **June 20 to July 4** via Nawrocki's [YouTube Channel](#). This run marks the return of digital screenings of the play, which premiered in December 2021.

The play is being performed to raise funds for **Ukrainian Humanitarian Aid**. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to over five million people fleeing the country and, sadly, the Russians are showing no signs of calling off their attacks that have left behind a trail of devastation, death, and war crimes in which civilians have been deliberately killed.

Nawrocki blends Canadian history, emigration, racism, wartime hysteria, Ukrainian folkloric medicinal rituals, music and legend along with family memory into this compelling, 40-minute tale.

The play is described as a story of “courage, hope and resistance.” In *Run Nawrocki Run! Escape from Banff Prison*, a poor, unemployed Ukrainian Canadian citizen is nabbed by the police, imprisoned, and forced to do slave labour in a federal concentration camp near Banff, Alberta. Despite the brutal conditions, he rebels, dreams and conspires to escape. His Baba in Ukraine works her magic to help him. Nawrocki blends Canadian history, emigration, racism, wartime hysteria, Ukrainian folkloric medicinal rituals, music and legend along with family memory into this compelling, 40-minute tale. The exciting, fast-paced, multimedia production features a soundtrack composed, played and recorded by the Nawrocki siblings.

Tickets for the play are free, but donations (with tax receipt) to the [Fundacja Folkowisko Foundation](#) will be gratefully appreciated.



To learn more about the play and the playwright, Westmount Magazine spoke with Norman Nawrocki.

**WM:** *What inspired you to write *Run Nawrocki Run! Escape from Banff Prison*, and how long did it take to write the play?*

**Nawrocki:** A fan wrote to me about finding my family name on a list of Canadian civilian internees from WWI. I researched the list and discovered that possibly three distant family members from my father's and my mother's side were imprisoned in Alberta between 1915 and 1920.

So I wrote this play to honour one of those distant relatives, a Nawrocki, from my father's side – a Ukrainian with a Polish/Ukrainian name – who successfully escaped from **Castle Mountain**. I wanted to talk about his courage and his fortitude, his temerity to think about and execute an escape despite the odds.

I wrote it because of all the stories told and untold that passed through my family about the racism, the discrimination, the suffering, the humiliation, the deprivation and misery that my family endured for decades and decades, simply because they were 'Ukrainian,' 'stupid Bohunks,' 'Bull hunks,' – the memories, the scarring that persists to this day, among my family who has survived. It took me a year to research and write it.

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**WM:** *What messages do you hope audiences will take away from the play?*

**Nawrocki:** I hope I can share with as many people as possible, not only in Canada but abroad as well, this shameful chapter of our history, this terrible injustice, and thus encourage people to think about not only the past but also the present and future, the situation of immigrants, migrants, refugees and others and how we can avoid repeating any more violations of fundamental human rights.

Apart from this particular message, my play is also a joyous call to rebellion. My main character is inspired and inspires, and despite all the odds, he never loses hope. He shows us what's possible, like how to find the courage within each of us to work with others for our collective freedom.

**WM:** *Do you believe that plays, especially politically themed plays, can provide the fuel to create concern and anger, and generate actions to resolve issues and problems?*



**Nawrocki:** Most certainly! Ever since I started writing politically themed plays and cabarets in the mid-1980s, I've always received incredibly positive feedback from audience members saying how the piece inspired them to take action on some issue or other, to join a group working on the issue, to give them the courage to take to the street, to do something political.

I've written plays about housing rights, tenant's rights, and welfare rights for community groups who said later how useful the plays were in sharing important information that otherwise wouldn't get across to the target audience. They would commission plays, 'community cabarets' we called them, and organize province-wide



tours of Quebec where we would perform them in places where people had never seen theatre before – soup kitchens, church basements in the poorest neighbourhoods – and after each show, thank us – myself and the other performers – for allowing them to experience that.

I've done plays where audience members would stand up in the middle of the show, yelling and pointing, "That's me! He's talking about me! About my life!" I've done plays about sexual politics that empowered LGBTQ people to come out after my performances or encouraged others to support those they previously dismissed.

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**WM:** *It's one thing to write a play, but another to be the person performing it. Do you find this is a perfect combination for you?*

**Nawrocki:** I love it! I love the stage in all its dimensions with all its freedom, challenges and opportunities to reach an attentive public. I started my career as a performing poet, which led to me fronting a band and that led to theatrical cabarets and musical theatre projects and that spawned even more stage work. But I've also written plays for others to perform, and I love that, too!

**WM:** *Charlie Chaplin and John Carpenter are well known for composing the music for many of their films. You co-wrote the music for this play with your sister Vivian. How would you describe the experience and process of composing music for a play?*

**Nawrocki:** My sister and I come from a musical family, so music has always been part of our lives. But it was only recently that we started to perform together as a duo, '**The Nawrockis**,' playing Ukrainian, Polish and other East European music, making music videos and touring.

But this newfound collaboration has also given us the chance to grow creatively and compose new work together. So when I write a play now and need a new soundtrack, she's the first person I turn to for ideas. She has immense talent, an amazing ear, and she can compose and play new material quickly. She reads my script, we discuss the mood, the feeling, and the ambience that would best fit, and together we jam out ideas and music. The process is quite satisfying and makes me so proud of her. To think all these years we never thought of working together! Thankfully, we now make the time to do this.

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**WM:** *What inspired you to be a playwright and an actor?*

**Nawrocki:** I got drunk one night and ended up on a stage reading poetry. The audience responded positively, so I kept writing and performing spoken word pieces that gradually grew in length and depth. I had always played the violin, but never in public. When I formed my first spoken word/music duo, '**Rhythm Activism**,' back in 1986 and we grew in numbers and expanded our vision for our shows, my acting and playwriting evolved naturally alongside this project.

**WM:** *What are some of your favourite plays and who are the playwrights that have most impacted you and your style of writing?*



**Nawrocki:** I love the work of **George Ryga**, a Canadian-Ukrainian playwright, but also that of **David Fennario**.

*WM: Do you have a tried and true process for writing a play or does it vary depending upon the theme and how you are feeling at the time?*

**Nawrocki:** No one tried and true blueprint for writing a play for me. It depends on the subject, the need, the time of the year, what's happening in the news, and whether I've had enough time to digest and mull over the material in my head in advance or not. Many variables influence my writing. Sometimes, too, it's more collaborative, more research-based, where I need to interview people, get the facts first, then confirm details in books or online.

*WM: As you are writing a play, are there any people that you ask to read your drafts and watch test performances?*

**Nawrocki:** I've done focus groups for some of my work where I invite random groups of friends and acquaintances to come over and give feedback for a reading. I've also shipped off rough manuscripts to trusted colleagues to review and critique.

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*WM: Politics and plays go all the way back to ancient Athens, and include playwrights such as Aeschylus and Aristophanes. Why is it important that we have a lively drama scene with politically inspired plays that discuss crucial and timely themes and issues?*

**Nawrocki:** Because the theatre gives us a direct link to a captive audience, it's a moment where we can help inspire public thinking, discussion and debate about critical issues right away. Not necessarily in the theatre, but after, outside, walking home from a performance, thinking about it before falling asleep, remembering what we saw and heard at breakfast, making the connections to our own lives and what needs to change.

We live in a society where public engagement around timely issues has become a rare thing. Where do people discuss important political concerns? We're glued to computer terminals and cell phones, but not having necessary conversations about the climate crisis, global politics, racism, the failure of capitalism, consumerism, about things that really matter. The theatre can provide a platform for airing these concerns. It doesn't happen often enough. I'm part of the **Montreal International Anarchist Theatre Festival**, now 15 years running, and we make a point of bringing this kind of provocative, politically engaging theatre to the stage. Our audiences really appreciate it, too.

*WM: Could you tell us about some of the other plays you have written and the themes they cover?*



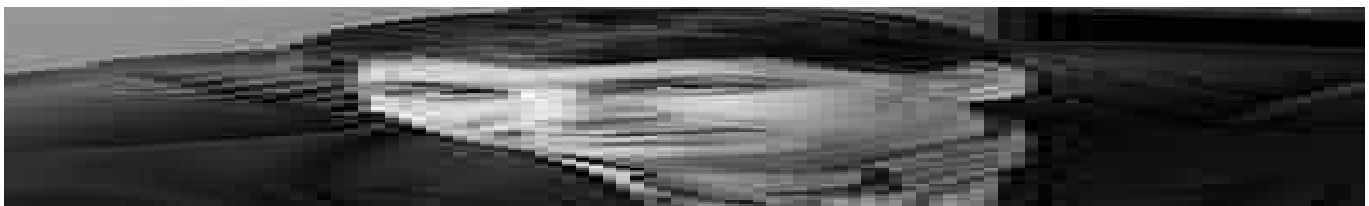
**Nawrocki:** My lockdown solo play, *Eviction? Dog's Blood!! Nick Zynchuk & Montreal's Red Plateau, 1933* (2020), was about the life of a Polish/Ukrainian unemployed worker who was gunned down by the police in Montreal on St-Dominique Street during a housing eviction protest. His funeral drew 30,000 people, the largest Montreal had ever seen. *Ukrainians, Pelicans & the Secret of Patterson Lake* (2020) was about my family's emigration to Manitoba in 1900 from Ukraine and the racism and hardships they endured at the hands of English/Scottish settlers. *Women Strike! The Winnipeg General Strike 1919–2019* (2019), was about the lives of nine immigrant working-class women during the historic strike. I wrote a series of four 'sex comedy' cabarets in the 1990s about date rape, sexual harassment and violence against women, but didn't joke about the serious stuff. Over a million people saw my live performances in Canada and the U.S. (*I Don't Understand Women!*, *My Dick & Other Manly Tales*, *Sex Toys!*, and *Lessons from a 7ft Penis*).

Images: Joyce Valbuena

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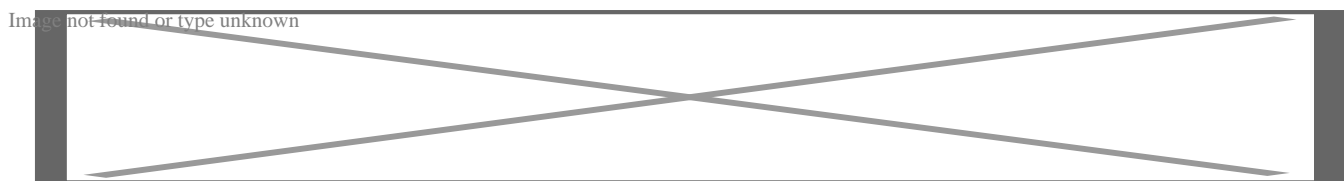
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