



Murdoch Schon and Alice Abracen on *The Covenant*

## Description

# Interviews with the director and playwright provide insight into the play

By Irwin Rapoport

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The play [\*\*\*The Covenant\*\*\*](#), written by **Alice Abracen**, directed by **Murdoch Schon**, and starring **Holly Gauthier-Frankel**, **Laura Mitchell**, **Romi Shraiter**, **Jonathan Silver**, and **Brett Watson**, is being performed at the **Segal Centre until December 3**.

Inspired by a true story, it is set in June 1944 at **Theresienstadt** where international Red Cross dignitaries are invited to marvel at this lively, cultural town, which appears to be a haven for Jewish people in the heart of Czechoslovakia. Little do they know that this paradise is a ghetto and concentration camp elaborately staged to conceal Nazi crimes against humanity. Forced to participate in the terrible charade, the determined politician Peter and the dedicated doctor Hilde find their idealism, their faith and their love put to a terrible test, as we see what shaped their lives together over the past years until this juncture in time.

Abracen, a Montreal playwright and co-founding member of **Theatre Ouest End**, was initially drawn to the story of the artists of Theresienstadt, people who laboured to lessen the horror that surrounded them through song, dance and performance. Though based on a historical event, the play is timeless.

Inspired by a true story, it [The Covenant] is set in June 1944 at Theresienstadt where international Red Cross dignitaries are invited to marvel at this lively, cultural town, which appears to be a haven for Jewish people in the heart of Czechoslovakia.

“I was horrified how that act of courageous, creative resistance was perverted, distorted, twisted and repurposed into a tool for the Nazis, perpetuating the cruelty,” she said. “Even today people are detained, imprisoned and



persecuted for their ethnic or racial identities. Concentration camps are run, their conditions kept secret from the world, and alternative narratives woven to conceal them. We still see dog-whistling and demagoguery designed to justify war and persecution. Evidence of the lessons of history is forgotten or misappropriated – as seen in the yellow stars worn at anti-vaccine protests.”

Schon is painfully aware that the global political climate is on a backwards slide toward fascism.

“We must never for a moment forget how easily propaganda becomes power in the hands of autocrats,” she said. “Another major thematic thrust of the play is belief and betrayal; are we judged by a single action or a lifetime of actions? It is crucial to witness what must be remembered and remember what we have witnessed.”

Director Murdoch Schon and playwright Alice Abracen provided more insight into the play and their careers in interviews with Westmount Magazine.

## Director Murdoch Schon



Murdoch Schon



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**WM:** *How did you prepare to direct *The Covenant*?*

**Schon:** As with all projects, I begin with the text and the historical context of the work. It is important to me to begin with research so that the work we do, on the design as well as in the rehearsal room, is grounded in the facts.

The play spans from 1927 to 1944, so I created a timeline and marked where each scene fell in the history of the rise of the Third Reich. Once I had a broad picture of how *The Covenant* and history meet, I focused on the real Theresienstadt. I spent time with a number of documentaries, articles, and books but the most influential work has been **H.G. Adler's *Theresienstadt 1941-1945***.

Alder's book is a comprehensive look at life in the ghetto of Theresienstadt. It also paints the most complete picture of the Red Cross visit that I was able to find. Adler tracks what lies had to be told and what tactics the Nazis used to convince the Red Cross that the ghetto was a place of peace for its prisoners. This research was vital to understanding what the reality of the characters' lives might have looked like.

**WM:** *What drew you to directing plays, and how have you progressed as a director?*

**Schon:** I was drawn to directing theatre in my undergraduate years at **Concordia University**. It started as a way to assert myself; as a young queer person, I was struggling to see myself represented in the theatre milieu. But these days, I direct because I love the process of collaborating with other artists.

I began by assisting a director on a school show and then later moved to assist in professional productions around Montreal. I took the directing class at Concordia and showed an aptitude for creating and holding a vision as well as working with actors. One of my professors suggested that if I was serious about pursuing this path I might apply to the **National Theatre School of Canada's** directing program. It took two tries, but I eventually was accepted into the program and completed it in 2020. The program was rigorous and challenging, but ultimately I had the chance to grow artistically as well as personally.

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– Murdoch Schon

**WM:** *Based on your experience as a director, what are the best ways to maximize the performances of actors?*

**Schon:** My philosophy when working with actors is to meet them wherever they are in their process and tailor my approach to their needs. Fear can be a major stumbling block for actors. This is why it's important for me to meet them where they are.

Acting is a hugely vulnerable task; it takes bravery and skill. The key to complex and nuanced performances is working slowly and in layers. Once one layer is in place, another is ready to be discovered. I would liken the process to wading into deep murky water; the hardest part is getting ready to do it – you ease in slowly, pausing to acclimatize, but by the end, you are ready to dive down and explore.

**WM:** *Who are some of the theatre directors that have inspired you, and what are some of the productions that have influenced your methods?*

**Schon:** I wouldn't be the artist I am today without my mentor **Matjash Mrozewski**. I have been very influenced by



the writing of director **Katie Mitchell** and **Anne Bogart**, as well as playwright **Suzan-Lori Parks**. Seeing the multi-disciplinary dance hybrid works of **Crystal Pite** (*Revisor*) and **Mélanie Demer** (*Danse Mutante*) changed how I approach my own process. **Peter Hinton-Davis'** Shaw Festival production of **Sex**, **Jackie Maxwell's** Stratford Festival's production of *Paradise Lost*, and **Sarah Garton Stanley's** production of the *Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, have all been on my mind as I work on *The Covenant*.

## Playwright Alice Abracen



Alice Abracen

**WM:** *How would you describe the writing process for *The Covenant*, and what type of research did you do to ensure authentic dialogue and the motivations and feelings of the characters?*

**Abracen:** This play involved a tremendous amount of research. Much of it was conducted at the **Montreal Holocaust Museum** and the **Jewish Public Library** but I also did a lot of research online. I read testimonials and transcripts, and watched the propaganda film in question, which someone had posted on YouTube at the time. While I was initially drawn to the story of the performers in Theresienstadt, whose act of creative resistance against oppression was appropriated by the Nazis and turned into a vehicle for propaganda, as I dove into the research, I uncovered the story of the **Elders of the Ghetto**, notably the member of the Jewish administration who was actually



forced to squire the Red Cross about the town — to give them the tour and to carry the burden of misrepresenting the horrific conditions to the strangers.

I continued investigating the Elders and was particularly moved by how, well, not elderly they were. Only a few years before, they'd been ambitious young movers and shakers, idealists whose willingness to assume leadership and refusal to abandon their brethren ultimately doomed them to face a terrible ethical dilemma, a forced allegiance with tyranny on behalf of their people to which most of them eventually succumbed. In terms of motivations and feelings, you pair that volume of research with empathy and you listen to the other voices in the room. I had an amazing team who contributed to the creation of this play — teachers and students of the National Theatre School who gave early feedback and greatly shaped the script.

In terms of authentic dialogue, I made the choice very early to have the characters sound contemporary. They might not be making Taylor Swift references, but the language is modern. I didn't want the period's language to create a convenient distance between us and the characters, make that gulf so the audience can rest comfortably in the sense that that was then — that this couldn't, wouldn't, happen today. I wanted the history to feel immediate, that it's happening now — because while this is a Jewish story, a historical story, it remains timeless. It's the story of an idealistic couple whose ambition to save the world brings them together, only for them to be driven apart by the increasing pressures of living under a fascist regime. It's about the terrible toll of the moral compromises that tyranny forces us to make to survive.

It's a love story about two people trying to stick to their creed when their very humanity is questioned and when the international community whose solidarity they believed in turns its back on them. The exploration of the moral corrosion that individuals suffer as they are subject to tyranny remains topical — so too does the play's ode to the courage those same individuals find to resist.

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— Alice Abracen

**WM:** *As a playwright, how do you select your topics, and do you have a standard writing style or does it vary? Could you tell us about your previous plays and what inspired them?*

**Abracen:** As a writer, I have always been fascinated by the empathy proximity breeds. I am interested in exploring that moment when an encounter between extremely divided individuals sparks a crisis where barriers dissolve, principles fail, absolutes give way to doubt, and the orthodoxies we cling to are compromised. In ***Omission***, a young journalist confronts an aging cardinal over his sins, forcing him to fight for his salvation. In ***The Tour***, an ancient battleground erupts in fresh conflict when a tourist occupies the site to prevent its destruction by militants.

In ***The Covenant***, a couple's sacred vows to each other are imperilled by the demands of survival under tyranny. ***What Rough Beast*** explores a family's and a campus's complex response to a violent act of terror in light of current debates about bipartisan dialogue, hate speech and the limits of empathy and tolerance. The next opera I'm working on, ***The Temptation of Eve***, is inspired by the true story of **Margaret Leonard**, one of the first female police officers in New York City. Sent undercover to infiltrate the sanctuary of Eve's Hangout, a lesbian nightclub, she finds herself questioning the mission and the system she's sworn to uphold.



I think my writing style varies but generally I tend to gravitate toward political drama laced with humour.

**WM:** *What drew you to the world of playwriting?*

**Abracen:** I always loved telling stories – I’d use toys and my own fingers when no toys were around to act out various dramas. But I first wrote for the stage in Elementary school. My mother, playwright and novelist [Ann Lambert](#), had started an after-school program called the **Roslyn Players**. One year they adapted *Ferdinand the Bull* and the next year, *Macbeth*. The third year was *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and my mother let me write the first draft. I invented new fairies and leaned on No Fear Shakespeare when I didn’t understand the language. Some of my lines stayed in the final script – and I was hooked. This was Grade 6.

**WM:** *Who are some of your favourite playwrights, and what are some of your favourite plays?*

**Abracen:** My mother and her work! Another work that had a huge influence on me not only as a writer but also on my religious and political practice was **Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America***.

*Feature image: Jonathan Silver in The Covenant, by Pavlo Tull*

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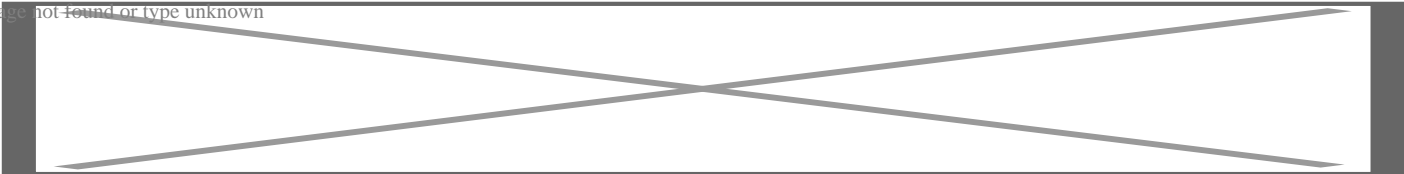
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