



What Rough Beast,
a timely new play

Description

Alice Abracen's latest work as performed by the graduating class of the NTS

By **Byron Toben**

The title of this well crafted new play by **National Theatre School** graduating student **Alice Abracen** comes from the closing lines of W.B. Yeats' iconic poem, *The Second Coming*.

I love this poem, which, while referring to the Irish Rising of 1916, was reproduced on some New York newspaper front pages the day after the 9-11 crashes into the World Trade Centre. See the end of this article for that timely text.

Ms. Abracen, despite her young age, has already written 13 plays, ranging in length from 29 to 115 minutes, with casts of from one to eight characters. I reviewed her *The Guest* at the 2017 Fringe.

Many of her efforts involve the juxtaposition between religion or other strongly held true beliefs and violence.

As a fan of Eric Hoffer's short book, *The True Believer* (reputedly John F Kennedy's favourite as well), this subject is up my alley.

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What Rough Beast was performed by the graduating class of the NTS as part of its annual New Words festival of works by its own student playwrights. It centres around a family of three, two brothers and a sister.

I do not recall any mention of their parents, who do not appear on stage. Anyway, they share an apartment together. Both the sister, Alyssa (**Charlotte Dennis**), and one brother, Kevin (**Robert Gerow**), are employed at a university, but the other brother, Johnny (**Kenzie Delo**), has been rejected as a student and is unemployed. Johnny voices increasing White Power sentiments while Kevin, with more liberal beliefs, fumes.



In the meantime, Michele (**Shauna Thompson**), a Jewish president of the student association confronts splits as to whether to block an extreme right speaker who had been invited to give a speech at the school or to confront him with reasoned exchange of ideas. She is a friend of Rafi (**Christopher Mejaki**), a somewhat secular Muslim student (he guzzles alcohol and is gay).

Events escalate to the point where both Johnny and Rafi die, as Johnny uses an M-16 rifle.

Throughout the play, much is made of social media. Johnny becomes a hero to the alt right. Alyssa's attempts to praise him as a dear brother, despite all, lead to her being fired. Shades of Antigone!

Kevin also is fired by association and may seek violent revenge. Wishy-washy university principal Thomas (**Gabriel Richardson**) resigns. Seemingly pleasant White Power recruiter Marlene (**Eva Foote**) continues to recruit.

'Throughout the play, much is made of social media. Johnny becomes a hero to the alt right.'

Also, a ghost appears in this otherwise naturalistic style play. Shades of Shakespeare!

Everything is falling apart... which brings us back to Yeats. Read on...

The Second Coming (selected excerpts)

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
the ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
are full of passionate intensity...
... And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Jerusalem to be born?

What Rough Beast ran at the Monument National from May 1 to 5.

Images: Maxime Côté



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Byron Toben is the immediate past-president of the Montreal Press Club.



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