

# In Segal Centre's The Secret Annex, Anne Frank is alive and thriving in 1950s Brooklyn



*JIM BURKE, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE*

[More from Jim Burke, Special to Montreal Gazette](http://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/in-segal-centres-the-secret-annex-anne-frank-is-alive-and-thriving-in-1950s-brooklyn) ([HTTP://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/JIM-BURKE-SPECIAL-TO-MONTREAL-GAZETTE](http://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/JIM-BURKE-SPECIAL-TO-MONTREAL-GAZETTE))

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Sara Farb, left, as Anne Frank, and Anne Cassar, as her sister Margot, in *The Secret Annex*. *DARIO AYALA / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

In Nathan Englander's 2012 short story, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, a group of Jewish friends sit around a table and play a game. It consists of speculating about which of their non-Jewish acquaintances would hide them in the event of another Holocaust.

There's another Anne Frank game that seems to have been doing the rounds over the years too: namely, *What Would Have Happened To Anne Frank Had She Lived?*

Philip Roth's 1979 novel, *The Ghost Writer*, for instance, floats the possibility that she's living anonymously in America in a reclusive writer's country house. Shalom Auslander's acerbically comic 2012 novel, *Hope: A Tragedy*, also has her living in America, this time as a cantankerous, foul-mouthed old lady discovered in the attic of an antsy New York Jew.

If that last one sounds like an exercise in extreme bad taste (it is, but brilliantly so, according to the critics), then a plot strand from television's *American Horror Story*, involving a thirtysomething Anne Frank falling into the clutches of a Nazi doctor in an insane asylum, would seem to have that beat.

Playwright Alix Sobler is the latest writer with a seat at the table in this "alternative Anne Frank" game. In *The Secret Annex*, which opens at the Segal Centre this week, Anne has managed to elude the Gestapo and, yes, made her way to America. In Sobler's version, however, there is one crucial difference.

"Usually, in these 'what if?' scenarios where she's still alive, everyone knows who she is through her diary," explains Sobler in a telephone interview. "As far as I know, mine is the only version that proposes that the diary would never have been published had she survived."

Sobler's play imagines Anne rooming with her sister Margot in 1950s Brooklyn. She enjoys the latest pop hits, catches *Roman Holiday* at the cinema, and pursues her literary dreams. She tries to generate interest in her diary, transformed, in this alternative universe, into the memoirs of a survivor.

Initially, Sobler, who is a performer as well as a writer, began writing the play for quite pragmatic reasons.

"I lamented never having had the opportunity to play Anne Frank. I was saying to my boyfriend at the time (he's my husband now) 'oh, maybe I'll write a play about her, but where she's 25 years old,' and we sort of laughed. But then he said, 'no, you should do something with that.' "

In the end, she didn't play the part when *The Secret Annex* premiered in Winnipeg in 2014, nor will she in the Segal production, its Montreal premiere. Sara Farb is in the leading role; she starred in the Stratford Festival's acclaimed production of *The Diary of Anne Frank* last year.

Since that initial spark, the play has evolved into something much more complex than a part a playwright wrote for herself. It's now an exploration of a terrible paradox. Farb, taking a break from rehearsals, puts it this way:

"Central to the story is the notion that Anne is such a universal presence because she didn't survive. And so the question that you grapple with when you walk away from this play is: would the diary matter so much if she had? Would we even know her? And that's a really difficult thing to reconcile, because it's entirely likely she would have been just another child in hiding who was lucky enough to survive."



A scene from *The Secret Annex*: from left, Sara Farb as Anne Frank, Anne Cassar as her sister Margot, and Brett Donahue as Peter Van Pels. *DARIO AYALA / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Despite the audience's painful awareness that they're watching a non-existent older Anne Frank, Sobler has focused on constructing her as credibly as possible. And Sobler can write; earlier this week, it was announced she'd won the Canadian Jewish Playwriting Competition for another play, *The Great Divide*.

Directing *The Secret Annex* is Marcia Kash, who has directed *The Diary of Anne Frank* three times, once at the Segal.

"I think Alix's play has harnessed a lot of the characteristics that are very clear in the diary," she says, "that so define who Anne is. And so this Anne is very recognizable as that Anne. Particularly the flaws in her are very evident, and those are the things that are tripping her up in this life. The seeds of that are very clear in the diary, and at the same time, so are some of the things you hope she might have enjoyed, like love."

There is the question, of course, of whether a play like *The Secret Annex* should even be attempted. After all, we now know, from eyewitnesses, many of the details of Anne Frank's appalling death in Bergen-Belsen. Doesn't this fictional escape route from that terrible truth smack of those bowdlerized versions of, say, happy-outcome *King Lear*s, though with infinitely higher stakes?

"I know what you're saying," Kash says. "Because there's been this sort of beatification of an icon representing the Holocaust, the idea could be seen as somewhat ... sacrilegious? We did talk about that a little bit, the idea that we're taking this symbol of the Holocaust, and all the horror around that, and playing around with a 'what if?' Is there something wrong about doing that?"

Part of the answer might be that, for all its breezy portrait of a life of freedom in colourful New York, this is not an escapist play at all, but rather a play about the impossibility of escaping a traumatic past.

"The Holocaust is present in the play," Kash says, "not in a graphic way,

but yes it's always there because they are survivors. There's a certain amount of guilt that they carry with them and Anne is very much stuck, very much a product of her past. That sense of surviving weighs heavily on everyone who went through that. It exists in the play, it's what motivates so much of the action."

And, as Sobler points out, "We're constantly confronted by the reminder that nothing that happens in the play is real. There's a kind of meta level to it. Hopefully, audiences will get lost in the story while at the same time remembering: 'Oh, but none of this actually happened.' "

#### AT A GLANCE

*The Secret Annex is on at the Segal Centre, 5170 Côte-Ste-Catherine Rd., from Sunday, Jan. 31 to Feb. 21. Tickets: \$44 to \$59; for students, \$24.50; seniors, \$39.50 to \$53. Call 514-739-7944 or visit [segalcentre.org](http://segalcentre.org) (<http://segalcentre.org>).*

To honour Alix Sobler as winner of the Canadian Jewish Playwriting Competition for The Great Divide, the Segal Centre will be giving a free public reading of the play, featuring Sara Farb, on Feb. 16 at 2 p.m.

## Anne Frank on stage over the years

The dramatic story of Anne Frank's life has inspired many a playwright over the years. Here are some key productions that aimed to capture her spirit:

**The Diary of Anne Frank.** Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett's 1955 adaptation is the one that set the template for stage versions, for good and ill. Sensitive and uncompromising in its portrayal of the cramped, unbearably tense existence in the attic, it's also been dismissed as schmaltzy, with Anne's fierce intellect replaced by a winsome

skittishness. Wendy Kesselman rewrote the play in 1997, working from the unabridged diary which had been released two years earlier. Kesselman's version is the one that played at last year's Stratford Festival.

**The Diary of Anne Frank: The Opera.** This hour-long "monodrama in twenty-one scenes" was created in 1972 by Russian composer Grigori Frid, who himself witnessed the horrors of the Second World War as a soldier in the Soviet Army.

**Yours, Anne.** Yes, there have been Anne Frank musicals, a concept which inevitably conjures up visions of the kind of unseemliness that Mel Brooks could work with. But this was the only one to get approval from Anne's father, Otto Frank. It premiered in 1985 off-Broadway. Some of the songs were previewed at Otto Frank's memorial service in 1980.

**Compulsion.** Rinne Groff's 2010 play told the disturbing story of one Meyer Levin, whose determination to have his stage version accepted over Goodrich and Hackett's led to a thirty-year, sanity-sapping battle. Mandy Patinkin played a fictionalized version of Levin, while Anne Frank was played by a marionette.

**Le Journal d'Anne Frank.** Renowned French writer Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt won a competition held by the Anne Frank Fonds, the Swiss-based organization set up by Otto Frank, to create a new stage version of the diary. However, there were initially no takers for it, so he bought his own theatre, ensuring a successful opening in Paris in 2012. Théâtre du Nouveau Monde's Lorraine Pintal directed its North American première here in Montreal last year.

**Anne.** A new theatre was built in Amsterdam to house this extravagant multimedia version in 2014. It was all done with the blessing of the Anne Frank Fonds. However, a spokesman for the rival Anne Frank House organization grumbled that this most tragic of stories shouldn't be the occasion for "a nice evening out."

Finally, if you're scouring this list for the infamous stage version – in which

Pia Zadora was so bad as Anne Frank that, when the Nazis burst in demanding her whereabouts, somebody in the audience yelled “She’s in the attic!” – well, sorry to disappoint you. Turns out it’s probably an urban myth.

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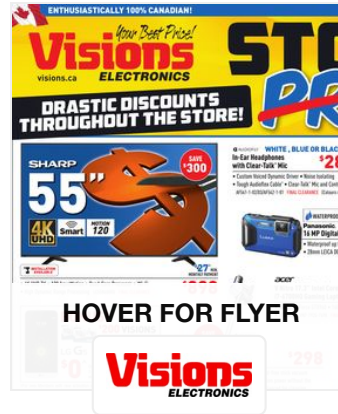
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