

The Secret Annex @ Segal Centre – February 4, 2016
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THE SECRET ANNEX :: Playing January 31 Until February 21, 2016

The Secret to Surviving

Our society tends to live vicariously through its fallen, martyred heroes. We see in them qualities we would like to see in ourselves, and they tend to represent hope for a better tomorrow, standing in sharp contrast to an often sorrowful yesterday. Perhaps few embody that idea more for Western peoples who have lived through the latter half of the 20th century than Anne Frank, the young girl whose diary put a face and a spiritual imprint, innocent and hopeful, on a weary, relatively decimated postwar Europe.

Playwright Alix Sobler plays with this premise, but examines an alternate timeline while peering in the looking glass in a striking piece of theatrical work known as *The Secret Annex*. Here, Anne Frank doesn't symbolize the dreams of a (literally) lost generation looking for a distinctive and disparate future; she is actually alive and well, having made it to Ellis Island to begin life anew as an American, ready to pitch in to assist the renewed prosperous era achieve its potential.

Sara Farb brings to life the role of someone who, well, didn't actually live to the age at which she's being portrayed, the heroine and protagonist of the story, Anne Frank. Sometimes, Anne seems to be her own antagonist as well, as the greatest turmoil with which she wrestles does not tend to originate from external sources, but rather stems from the burning inner conflict that eventually threatens to consume her. Farb does a marvellous job making us believe she IS Anne Frank, or who Anne might have been, with an ebullient portrayal of a young woman who many of us would either like to be, or would like our sisters, mothers and daughters to be. She plays off the two leading men in the story, so effectively brought to life by Brett Donahue and Marcel Jeannin, and is often the eye of her own self-induced hurricane. Seemingly caught between the past she lived through and the future she wants, Anne Frank as a living, breathing New Yorker after World War II symbolizes all of us, our dreams, hopes, fears, where we came from and where we are going.

With nuanced lighting and straightforward, effective set design crisply illustrating the period, Anne takes us on a journey many of us are all too familiar with, trying to figure out what we are doing here. And for anyone who is not a survivor of such a destructive period in our history, one can only presuppose the storm that can brew inside in terms of philosophical and religious questioning; the pain of knowing you survived what many did not, and the struggle to figure out what's next. Anne's relentless pursuit to publish her diary of her experiences hiding in the attic during the War runs smack into the pressure to live the postwar American dream, to settle down and start a family, extinguishing the restless dreams of youth. This production is truly poignant from beginning to end, and simply cannot disappoint, since Sobler's living vision of Anne is the life force that burns within us all.

The Secret Annex continues at the Segal Centre until February 21st.