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The Arts

## From rage to stage

Playwright channels fury into gritty comedy about disgraced radio personality



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Playwright Alix Sobler penned *Jonno* in the wake of the initial allegations against Jian Ghomeshi.

Alix Sobler is angry.

The New York City/Winnipeg playwright has a great many other qualities too, of course, but it was white-hot rage that motivated her to write *Jonno*, a dark comedy about a famous radio host/author who uses his power and status

to abuse women.

If the story sounds very familiar, it's because it is, and not just because there's a character called Mr. Donkey Long-Ears. Yes, *Jonno* — which premieres at the Winnipeg Fringe Theatre Festival this week with seven shows at Venue 6 (Tom Hendry Warehouse) — is a fictional work inspired by the events surrounding Jian Ghomeshi, but the particulars hardly matter. You don't have to look very hard to find examples of high-profile men who hurt women and who are protected by the institutions they work for — whether it's a national broadcaster, the NFL or Hollywood.

So, yeah, Sobler is angry.

"I value my anger greatly," she says over coffee. "It's very inspiring to me and drives me forward. I think people can face anger a little more and be OK with that. I think we accept it from men very readily and women are really conditioned to make sure everybody's feeling comfortable. I went into this play insisting upon myself that people don't have to feel comfortable. That's not what theatre is about."

"Theatre is about facing truth, even though theatre itself is a lie. But there are truths being told."

Sobler began writing *Jonno* in late October 2014, the very week that the allegations of sexual assault against Ghomeshi first went public and the former Q host was axed from the CBC. It was a direct response to the story as it was unfolding — visceral, urgent, electric.

"There's a lot of moments in it where I look back and think, 'Did I write that?' Because it came out in a fury. I left it on the page because I thought, 'This is real. This is how people feel in the moment.'"

It's grittier work than we've seen from Sobler who, in addition to being a veteran of the fringe festival circuit, has also has plays mounted at the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre (*The Secret Annex* made its world premiere at the Warehouse in 2014) and Winnipeg Jewish Theatre (*Some Things You Keep*, 2010). "A lot of my stuff is very polite and period and delicate. This is not."

Unlike her play *The Secret Annex*, which placed a real person (Anne Frank) in a fictional situation (she survived the war and is living in Brooklyn), *Jonno* is about a fictional person in a real situation. Sobler warns that the show contains violence that looks uncomfortably real, but the subject matter is also unflinching. The playwright plucked key threads from the conversations that happened post-Ghomeshi — about misogyny, consent, feminism, male entitlement, rape culture, victim-blaming, celebrity status, the justice system — and weaved them together in what she hopes is a nuanced piece that offers multiple perspectives on these complex subjects.

To that end, *Jonno* is very much a response to the 140-character, hot-take culture of the Internet and "the flattening of nuance," as Sobler puts it.

It's also a comedy. An angry comedy, but a comedy nonetheless. Some of the show's laughs are uncomfortable, Sobler says, but there are also straight-up jokes.

"I think there's an unwillingness to look at situations and find the humour because we don't want to hurt people who have been hurt, and I respect that hugely," she says. "But I think that having experienced traumas in my own life, for me it's helpful to laugh... It takes power back. It allows you to say, 'I've moved so far from this or I've moved beyond the pain where I can't stop crying that I'm able to laugh at this.'"

It's precisely the kind of work one hopes to encounter at the fringe: bold, provocative, current. Sobler — who is back in New York City to earn her MFA in playwriting from Columbia University after a decade living and working in Winnipeg — wanted this particular play to debut in Canada, and she's thrilled it's at the Winnipeg Fringe Theatre Festival.

"It's such a playground for experimentation," she says. "I think this is the place for it. People come with an open

mind. People aren't expecting to be comfortable. People are ready to be challenged."

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