

Seeing social struggles through individual characters

historical research, well-crafted dramatic intensity and moments of poetry and humour

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a review of

3 online plays by Norman Nawrocki, 2020–2022: “EVICTION? Dog’s Blood!!;” “Ukrainians, Pelicans & the Secret of Patterson Lake,” and “Run Nawrocki Run! Escape from Banff Prison”



Norman Nawrocki in “Run Nawrocki Run! Escape from Banff Prison”

Norman Nawrocki is a veteran artiste and activist in the Montreal anarchist and radical communities. He has produced more than 20 theater plays, 14 books, and over 30 music albums as a solo artist or with many bands and collectives since the 1980s such as Rhythm Activism, Bakunin’s Bum, Anarchist Writers Bloc, and DaZoque.

How could Norman, who normally travels world-wide with his creations, including his anti-sexist comedy shows, remain inactive because of Covid?

He didn’t. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Nawrocki has written, directed and performed three plays: “EVICTION? Dog’s Blood!! Nick Zynchuk & Montreal’s Red Plateau 1933,” “Ukrainians, Pelicans & the Secret of Patterson Lake,” and “Run Nawrocki Run! Escape from Banff Prison.”

As their titles indicate, these three online plays continue with the historical drama genre explored by Nawrocki in his recent creations, the novel *Cazzarola! Anarchy, Romani, Love, Italy* (PM Press, 2013) and the plays, “No Way! No Way! Six Anti-Fascist Women” (2018), and “Women Strike! The Winnipeg General Strike 1919” (2019). This is a genre that the author has

come to practice with great finesse, interweaving historical research, well-crafted dramatic intensity and moments of poetry and humor.

But unlike these recent creations which involved many collaborations in music and acting, plus extended touring across Canada and Europe, these three new plays were created in a context of isolation, with limited means and collaborators, and available only online. They contrast the author’s extensive and diverse catalogue by their plunge into the history of the Canadian Ukrainian community inspired by his family stories. The isolation and the limited means of production due to the confinement and the proximity of the subjects to his personal trajectory were new challenges for Nawrocki and he found a way to make great art out of them.

The first play of this lockdown trilogy, “EVICTION? Dog’s Blood!!” (2020), tells the story of Nick Zynchuk, one of the many poor and unemployed Polish-Ukrainian workers trying to survive with dignity in post-Depression Montreal. His story, which became tragically famous at the time, illustrates the hard but dynamic life in what was then called the Red Plateau, a Montreal neighborhood (today overly gentrified) characterized by an immigrant working class population and radical culture and organizations. The neighborhood was rocked by evictions, but unlike many areas in the city, these were often faced with community organized, street-level resistance.

The following play, “Ukrainians, Pelicans & the Secret of Patterson Lake” (2020,) depicts the long and difficult journey of a Ukrainian peasant family immigrating to Canada at the beginning of the 20th century. Through a series of false promises, miserable traveling, lodging and sanitary conditions, work exploitation and racist oppression, the play follows an old man as he reminisces about arriving in Manitoba during the first wave of Ukrainian immigration to Canada.

“Run Nawrocki Run!” sheds light on the case of the largely unknown forced work camps in Western Canada where thousands of Eastern European immigrants (many of them Canadian citizens) were imprisoned in the wake of the racist political/collective delirium throughout the country as it entered World War I. The character depicted by Nawrocki was inspired by one of his ancestors who was imprisoned in a camp under inhuman conditions near Banff, Alberta, but was able to escape.

Through these three plays, Nawrocki continues his exploration of the genre of historical drama poetically. Standing on solid historical research in collaboration with local historians, the author allows the public to learn about some untold parts of the people’s history of Canada. While this is in itself important, Nawrocki goes further by making his audience feel the tragedy of these singular lives, opening through that feeling a sensibility to the injustices inflicted on individuals and groups throughout Canadian history.

The writing is nuanced, with a good sense of drama and sublime moments while evoking a more experimental tone. He achieves a balance between the poignant dimension of the subjective position of the characters in the tragic historical events, and the strangeness of some unconscious/delirious/ dreamlike drifts among these dark experiences.

This is particularly well done in “EVICTION? Dog’s Blood!!” and “Run Nawrocki Run!,” which take the audience into haunting moments that contrast well with the more narrative parts of the plays. One of the greatest strengths of Nawrocki’s art is his crossing transversally artistic mediums in which he uses his capacity to inform the audience about social struggles through the lenses of individual characters, but without moralizing or being too documentary. The power of his art troubles the thinking and perceptions, generating strange affects.

The force of Nawrocki’s writing is only partially supported by the staging of the plays. His excellent acting capacities radiate the stage, and he doesn’t need many props to take the viewers into the characters’ tragic destiny. True to his DIY ethics, this experienced performer is used to minimalist settings and uses a few props in ingenious ways.

Indeed, the best passages of the three plays are probably the ones where quite limited theater sets and props are involved, for example, the interesting use of shadows in “EVICTION!! Dog’s Blood!!” But sometimes the low quality of some technological devices and unfortunate attempts in the staging are more distracting than useful. “Ukrainians, Pelicans and the Secret of Patterson Lake” suffers more from these technical limitations. However, this limitation has been significantly overcome in “Run Nawrocki Run!”, which is the most technically elaborated play of the trilogy. But even then, only a shovel and a good use of sound effects bring more intensity than a whole complex set-up.

The sonic and musical dimension of Nawrocki’s theater work is worth mentioning: the musician not only knows how to craft a good soundtrack for his plays using his violin, but he is also good at creating a whole sonic ambiance supporting the theatrical sequence.

Through the collaborative and technical limitations specific to our time, Norman Nawrocki has found a way to extract singular lives from the depths of history and to make them shine with style. In that sense, the creation of these three online plays connects with what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze said about the creative process of Franz Kafka: “You have to work on the wall, because without a set of impossibilities, you won’t have the line of flight, the exit that is creation”.

Like his characters who collide against the walls imposed on them by their time, Norman Nawrocki's recent theater plays are true creations, tracing ways between impossibilities.

Hubert Gendron-Blais is a Montreal-based musician, author, and researcher working at the confluence of philosophy, music, and politics. He has published two books, *La charge de l'air* (short stories, 2017) and *Bitches* (poetry, 2012). He began the experimental project Devenir-ensemble and the post rock band, ce qui nous traverse. hubertgendron-blais.org

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