

MEDIA REVIEW

THE WATERSHED
2015-17

The logo for 'Porte Parole' is centered within a white semi-circle. It features the words 'PORTE' and 'PAROLE' in a bold, teal, sans-serif font. A teal line with a speech bubble tail is positioned above 'PORTE' and below 'PAROLE'.

PORTE PAROLE

THE WATERSHED

Written by Annabel Soutar

Directed by Chris Abraham

Co-produced by Porte Parole Productions and Crow's Theatre

Annabel Soutar's (...) play The Watershed, brings chaotic comic levity to what is essentially a dead-serious work of documentary theatre: a show that sees Canada at a watershed moment in its pursuit of both economic prosperity and ecological sustainability.

— Martin Morrow, *The Globe and Mail* (July 14, 2015)

PLAY SYNOPSIS

In this documentary play, Annabel Soutar — a Montreal playwright — investigates the sudden and controversial announcement by the Harper government in 2012 to cut funding to the internationally renowned fresh water research site, the Experimental Lakes Area (ELA), in Kenora, Ontario. Annabel interviews freshwater scientists, government officials, activists and business leaders along the way to gain different viewpoints on the subject, and ultimately decides to travel to Alberta's oil sands in a Winnebago with her husband and two pre-adolescent children to get a full picture of the story. Developed between 2012-2015, *The Watershed* is a funny, deeply human documentary that reveals the complexities underlying the environmental, economic and political stakes of oil production and fresh water preservation in Canada.



What is documentary theatre?

Documentary theatre records stories and portrays characters from real life and reflects that reality in the artificial realm of the theatre. Its goal is to invite audience to reflect on contemporary social, political and environmental issues while also enjoying high quality stage artistry. Documentary plays are extensively researched and composed of compelling verbatim documentary material (interviews, media reports, court transcripts, etc.).

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Annabel Soutar is an award winning Montreal-based playwright, co-founder and Artistic Director of Porte Parole Productions. She attended Princeton University where she studied English and Theatre. Her plays tackle social, environmental and political issues, and adopt the documentary approach to theatre. She has written seven plays including *The Watershed*, *Novembre*, *2000 Questions*, *Seeds*, *Import/Export*, *Sexy béton* and *Fredy*. Annabel lives in Montreal with actor Alex Ivanovici and their two daughters Ella and Beatrice. In 2015, Soutar was selected as one of the *Globe and Mail's* Canadian Artists of the Year.

MEDIA REVIEW

THE WATERSHED

*** Selected as the best of Canadian theatre in 2016**, *The Globe and Mail* (2016) *

A sprawling, ambitious, revealing, challenging production that also happens to be blissfully hilarious and entertaining as well.

— Martin Knelman, *Toronto Star* (2015)

Sprawling, funny, smart – its themes about political polarization endure.

— Kelly Nestruck, *The Globe and Mail* (2016)

[The Watershed makes a splash](#) || Martin Knelman, *Toronto Star*, July 17, 2015.

[The Watershed and 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea reviews: A soaking environment](#) || Robert Cushman, *National Post*, July 16, 2015.

[The Watershed: Rollicking road trip with a somber environmental message](#) || Martin Morrow, *The Globe and Mail*, July 14, 2015.

[We're All In This Together](#) || Martin Morrow, *Torontoist*, July 10, 2015.

[THE WATERSHED national tour at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre in September](#) || Kelly Nestruck, *The Globe and Mail*, February 26, 2016.

[Despite the topic, nothing dry about The Watershed](#) || Jim Burke, *Montreal Gazette*, November 11, 2016.

[The Watershed selected as best of the Canadian stage for 2016](#) || Kelly Nestruck, *The Globe and Mail*, December 23, 2016.

[Art imitates life in journalist's verbatim stage play](#) || Randall King, *The Winnipeg Free Press*, March 15, 2017.

TORONTO STAR

Toronto Star

July 17, 2015

Martin Knelman

The Watershed makes a splash:

Oil sands debate makes for high energy theatre in documentary stage work

The Watershed, a buzz-generating hit at [Panamania](#), comes as a happy surprise to anyone who thought seeing it would be more of a civic duty than a great theatrical experience.

Annabel Soutar's play is about the federal government's shutdown of a federal research project that measured, among other things, the effect of the Alberta oil sands on Canada's supply of fresh water. It's also about the ongoing debate on the economic importance of the energy boom, about alarm bells the oil sands ring among environmentalists and about how hard it can be to get experts to speak openly.

That may not strike you as the basis for a perfectly memorable show, but *The Watershed* — staged by director Chris Abraham — has become an audience favourite at Panamania. And for very good reasons, as I discovered by attending a performance at the Berkeley Street Theatre, where it will have its final performance (for now) on Sunday.

It's a sprawling, ambitious, revealing, challenging production that also happens to be blissfully hilarious and entertaining as well. And that's largely because Soutar throws herself and her family into the story, making it dramatic and funny instead of just an exchange of expert talking heads on different sides of the issue. I predict it will win awards. And it's sure to return to Toronto, but likely not until the 2016-17 season.

The key question in the play is whether the federal government's shutdown of the [Experimental Lakes Area](#) near Kenora, Ont., was merely a matter of budget-cutting or a political move to squelch controversy about the government's economic support for Alberta oil.

With six actors playing many characters, *The Watershed* is a huge payoff for a style of theatre writing that Soutar has pioneered. She and her Montreal-based company, [Porte Parole](#), have a mission to create documentary plays that engage audiences in candid, sometimes critical conversations about major public issues.

Her method is to interview a lot of people on a given topic, collect recordings of speeches, then filter her material and turn it into a play, putting much of it into the mouths of her characters. Many of those

characters are real people. In *Watershed*, among the characters are Annabel herself (played by Kristen Thomson), her husband, their two daughters and her father (played by Eric Peterson).

Also in the cast: Bruce Dinsmore, Tanja Jacobs, Alex Ivanovici, Ngozi Paul and Amelia Sargisson. Characters they play include Stephen Harper, Maude Barlow and Chris Abraham, who is now her creative partner and the artistic director of Crow's Theatre. Abraham is also the director of one of Stratford's big hits of the season, *The Taming of the Shrew*. And he is in the midst of planning a new theatre in Leslieville, where Crow's Theatre will make its new home starting in late 2016 or early 2017.

After partnering with theatres in Montreal for more than a decade, Soutar collaborated with Abraham and Crow's Theatre on an earlier documentary drama, *Seeds*, which was not only staged in Toronto but has since hit the road and been seen by audiences in four provinces.

"I've done a lot of research, but I would not hold myself up as an expert about watersheds," she told me the other day.

She knew there was a lot of debate about how Canada manages the oil patch, but she craved a direct experience.

"I felt I needed to get out there, meet other Canadians, not just in Quebec, and talk to Albertans." The upshot: Along with her husband, their daughters and a friend, Soutar took an epic trip across the country in a Winnebago.

It's the first time Soutar has included so much about herself in a play. And what makes it work is an amazingly candid portrait of the playwright/researcher managing her family and her work, with outcomes sometimes dramatic, sometimes comic and sometimes frustrating.

"I made myself vulnerable," she says.

If the audience was going to be touched, and feel directly involved, she needed to get up close and personal. "What you see is a collision of me as mother and me as playwright."

Soutar's intention was not to take sides or point fingers but to dramatize the debate.

She even used her father to articulate the pro-government, pro-energy argument.

Still, it's clear she does not agree with him.

"My attempt is to be rigorous and even-handed," says Soutar. "No one can be 100 per cent objective. I attempted to speak to people on all sides, to have an open dialogue, but sometimes my attempts failed." And partly *The Watershed* is about how hard it can be to get all the players on a controversial issue to speak openly about it.

For theatregoers, the issue is when you can hope to catch this play.

The Watershed and 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea reviews: A soaking environment



ROBERT CUSHMAN | July 16, 2015 3:46 PM ET
 More from Robert Cushman



Gunter Kravitz/CP

Water, water everywhere. If there's a unifying theme to the theatre offerings at Panamania, cultural wing of the PanAm Games, it's aquatic. The keynote offering, from Crow's Theatre and Montreal's Porte Parole, is *The Watershed*, which is documentary theatre at a very high level.

It starts in the Montreal home of Annabel Soutar, the play's author and principal character. It's 2012, and her house has been flooded. The experience gets her asking questions about water, how it gets to us, how it's treated, and eventually to writing a play, the one we're watching. Her focus becomes the Experimental Lakes Area (ELA) in Kenora, Ontario, a research project stripped by the Harper government of its hardly exorbitant funding (appropriately described as a drop in the ocean) and turned over to the private sector.

The first half of the play finds Soutar taking plane-trips to interview interested parties. The second depicts a longer but more leisurely journey. Soutar, her husband and their two daughters, six and eight when we first meet them, pile into a Winnebago, along with another little girl, the daughter of Chris Abraham, director of Crow's and of this production. Their ultimate destination is Fort MacMurray, to see for themselves the oil sands of whose polluting properties they have heard so much. The trip is also meant as an education project for the three young people, to teach them how to ask their own questions. Which they do, in a highly diverting scene in which they're let loose to interview an oil-worker whose responses are for more nuanced than we or they might expect.

So the play is as much about its author as it is about its ostensible subject. That sounds like a recipe for disaster, but in fact it works extraordinarily well. It might not do so if Annabel was played by an actress other than Kristen Thomson who, in addition to her intelligence and likeability (and being a playwright herself), excels at projecting honest puzzlement. She has an agenda, but she's receptive to all points of view. You can see the muscles of her face contract when she receives unwelcome or distressing information; you can also marvel at the way in which she makes facts and figures sound like conversation. (The script is verbatim drama, though apparently heavily edited and re-worked.) She is also a believably vexed mother, berating her daughters for watching movies online rather than looking out the wagon windows and discovering Canada. And she's a creature of privilege, with rich parents and, as she brusquely admits, able to authorize her own expenses by being president of her own Porte Parole board.

Alex Ivanovici, Soutar's real-life husband, plays himself, supportive but anxious not to mess up a lucrative gig on X-Men. There are excellent multiple performances from Bruce Dinsmore and Tara Nicodemo, and knockout work from Tanja Jacobs who does a wonderful Maude Barlow. She also plays the junior Ms. Abraham, rather too bouncily; Amelia Sargisson and Ngozi Paul are more discreetly energetic as the junior Soutars. Sargisson is also superb as a deeply worried ELA researcher (her departure leaves a hole in the play) and Paul periodically dons a beard to impersonate the director, seen apparently taking calls from his bathtub and worrying about the effects of the play on his funding. These scenes are hilarious if you know the people but, I would guess, still entertaining if you don't. It's also an honest admission that the show's creators are not immune to the temptations of compromise.

It can also suffer from information overload, in its first half, and underload in its second. We never really learn just what the Soutar family made of the oil sands or indeed what the journey back was like. Most importantly, there's no hint of how the ELA has fared. But there is a lovely last scene, a debate between Soutar the liberal journalist and her conservative father. As Thomson and Eric Peterson play it, it ripples with love, respect and honest inquiry. We need more political drama like this. We need more politics like this. Abraham's direction is a feat of fearsome technical complexity, brought off with devilish insouciance.

The technological marvels are more obviously insistent in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, Rick Miller's dramatization of Jules Verne's prophetic submarine thriller. It shares *The Watershed's* environmental concern; in this somewhat updated adaptation Verne's Captain Nemo has forsaken landlocked civilization in order to protest the acidification of the oceans. I said "somewhat updated" because, again like *The Watershed*, this show is partly about its author.

There's a narrator figure called Jules, who takes the place of the professor's valet in the original, and alters its plot line from time, giving us fair warning when he does so. He's given a commanding performance, alternately mischievous and worried, by Andrew Shaver, but none of the other actors come across convincingly, least of all Miller himself, a drastically lightweight Nemo. As director, he gives us a fine visual show whose effects are, need I say, of oceanic proportions.

The Watershed runs until July 19 at Berkeley Street Theatre, Toronto; *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* at Daniels Spectrum, Toronto completed its run on July 15.



The Watershed: Rollicking road trip with a somber environmental message

MARTIN MORROW

The Globe and Mail, Jul. 14, 2015

It would be hard enough for any investigative journalist to chase a story about the closing of a major, federally funded freshwater research station in which the government refused to comment. But imagine chasing it while riding across the country in a Winnebago motorhome with your actor husband, two giddy prepubescent girls and an unruly dog.

That real-life situation, delightfully dramatized in Annabel Soutar's Panamania play *The Watershed*, brings chaotic comic levity to what is essentially a dead-serious work of documentary theatre: a show that sees Canada at a watershed moment in its pursuit of both economic prosperity and ecological sustainability.

Montreal playwright Soutar is the journalist in question – her chosen medium is theatre – and that Winnebago scenario grew out of her desire to involve the next generation in her assignment. Commissioned by Panamania, the Pan Am Games's arts and culture festival, to create a play about water as a natural resource, she enlisted her own daughters as her research assistants. Never mind that they weren't too sure what a "watershed" is, sometimes confused Stephen Harper with Rob Ford and would rather be watching *Frozen* than discussing tailings ponds. They learned a lot along the way. And we do, too.

Like *Seeds*, Soutar's previous documentary about genetically modified crops, *The Watershed* is a solid piece of reporting. But where that play sometimes overwhelmed us with facts and arguments, this one keeps our attention with splashes of satire, a steady stream of domestic comedy and a playful sprinkling of meta-theatrical jokes. And it once again taps into the considerable resources of director Chris Abraham and his creative team, who have crafted a fast-flowing, continually inventive production. (As in the case of *Seeds*, Abraham's Toronto-based Crow's Theatre and Soutar's Montreal company, Porte Parole, are the show's co-producers.)

The Watershed begins, appropriately enough, with Annabel (played by Kristen Thomson) and husband Alex Ivanovici (playing himself) using a home plumbing crisis to teach daughters Ella (Amelia Sargisson) and Beatrice (Ngozi Paul) about water loss. Soon the girls are both helping and hindering their mom as she looks into the shutting down of the Experimental Lakes Area in Ontario's Kenora District after its budget was slashed in 2012 by the feds.

Annabel finds a passionate defender of the ELA in young scientist Diane Orihel (also portrayed by Sargisson). But she can't get anyone in the government to talk. Trying to understand both sides of the situation, she finally turns to her conservative father (Eric Peterson), who obliges with a sympathetic take on Stephen Harper's economic motives.

Ultimately, Annabel decides she needs to see the bigger picture – notably, the water-polluting oil sands in northern Alberta – so she convinces her theatre board to triple her travel budget, pulls the kids out of school and heads west in that Winnebago. The bumpy road trip to Fort McMurray forms the backbone of the play's second act.

In the three years since we saw *Seeds*, Abraham has directed some outstanding Shakespeare productions at the Stratford Festival and it shows here. *The Watershed* is almost Shakespearean in length (close to three hours with an intermission) and sweeps us up in a hurly-burly staging with a protean cast of eight that feels like a cast of 18.

He also brings out the best in all concerned. Peterson is a joy, whether spoofing the histrionics of a Fox News anchor or quietly articulating the argument for capitalism as Annabel's father. Tanja Jacobs swings easily from that left-wing firebrand Maude Barlow to little, saucer-eyed Hazel, Abraham's daughter, who tags along on the cross-country trip. A smooth Bruce Dinsmore does wry turns as a Beatles-crooning Harper and a chocolate-voiced Jian Ghomeshi (appearing here pre-scandal, as the host of CBC Radio's *Q*). Tara Nicodemo is an elegant presence in various roles, including Guy Laliberté's partner Claudia Barilla of the One Drop Foundation.

Ivanovici as Ivanovici has one of the show's funniest interludes, trying to urinate in the bathroom of the moving Winnebago. As Ella and Beatrice, a charmingly rambunctious Sargisson and Paul make us forget they're adults playing little girls, while Paul also does a wicked impersonation of director Abraham, complete with fake beard. Soutar doesn't spare anyone in this play, least of all herself. Thomson's relatable Annabel can be over-earnest and cranky and, at one hilarious low point, ends up scrounging desperately for some discarded strips of bacon, only to be beaten to it by the family dog.

Julie Fox's set, dotted with bathroom fixtures, Kimberly Purtell's aquatic lighting and Thomas Ryder Payne's dripping-faucet sound design all accentuate the show's water theme. But this is not just a play about the source of life, but also about how we live today. In an election year, it asks us to resist our ideological impulses, start listening to one another and have some long, hard conversations about what kind of country we want our kids to inherit.



Review: The Watershed Crafty show proves politics and art can be a great mix

BY SUSAN G. COLE, NOW
SEPTEMBER 29, 2016

Politically conscious works of art can often be so earnest your eyes could roll out of their sockets.

But **Annabel Soutar** has figured out a way to make real-life eco-passion and political intrigue consistently gripping.

Annabel (**Kristen Thomson**) has been commissioned to do a play for Panamania, the cultural component of the Pan Am Games. Her subject is water, but soon it blossoms into a full-on investigation of the Harper government's de-funding of the Experimental Lakes Area – a series of research stations involved in environmental assessments of Canadian fresh water. Along the way, she slams the Conservatives' anti-science agenda and Harper's controlling ways.

Could be dull as dishwater and Soutar's strategy of using dialogue lifted directly from actual interviews doesn't sound like it could be the basis for compelling theatre.

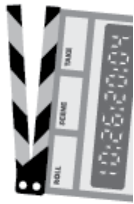
But it is, thanks to three main factors. Annabel engages her entire family in the project, including her husband (**Alex Ivanovici**) and her two daughters, eight-year old Beatrice (**Ngozi Paul**) and 10 year-old Ella (**Amelia Sargisson**). Soutar's portrait of family life is vivid, very realistic and often hilarious. Conversations between emerging eco-activist Annabel and her conservative capitalist dad (**Eric Peterson**) are intriguing, though the last one is a bit too didactic. And just when you think we're getting too much data, we're back with the rollicking family.

Soutar's cast, under the skilled direction of **Chris Abraham**, is tremendous, all of them, save Thomson (who expertly embodies Annabel's passion, intelligence and frustration), playing multiple roles, often of real life characters – **Bruce Dinsmore** nails his impression of Harper. Sargisson and Paul show impressive range, evoking their kid characters and various adults with precision.

And the stagecraft – set, costumes and props by Julie Fox, lighting by **Kimberly Purtell**, sound by **Thomas Ryder Payne** and projections by **Denyse Karn** – is stunning. The actors are consistently moving scenery and transferring props to one another in ways that look almost choreographed, facilitating the cast's fluid character shifts. The same platforms that function as daises and furniture in the first act are

miraculously transformed in the second act into the Winnebago the family drives to Fort McMurray.

The result of all this is great theatre – brainy and heartfelt.



Finding the Canadian Moral Compass, on the Road

JULY 15, 2015 AT 2:15 PM

The Crow's Theatre/Porte Parole co-production *The Watershed* is something we can be proud to put on the international stage of Panamania.

BY CARLY MAGA



The Soutar/Ivanovic family goes for a helicopter ride over the tar—sorry, oil—sands. Photo by Gunter Kravis.

The Watershed

Berkeley Street Theatre (26 Berkeley Street)

Runs to July 19

\$15 - \$42



With all (well, *some*) eyes on Toronto as we host the Pan Am/Para Pan Am Games, we've received a lot of flak for our apparent dearth of enthusiasm for the mega-event. While that's obviously not true, the arts community in Toronto might very well be a bit distracted—the cultural programming in the Panamania pseudo-festival is pretty top-notch. We hope that our international visitors will be able to take in some of that, as well as a match or two, because some of it, like Annabel Soutar's *The Watershed*, is exactly the kind of art that Canada should be presenting to the world.

The Watershed, which runs only until Sunday, is a continuation of the very successful partnership between Montreal's Porte Parole theatre company and Toronto's Crow's Theatre after 2012's *Seeds*. In that show, playwright Annabel Soutar used her own investigations and interviews to create a piece of documentary performance (all dialogue is verbatim, or taken directly from written documents) that chronicled the court case between Saskatchewan farmer Perry Schmeiser and the Monsanto corporation, while simultaneously writing herself into the show to transparently display her own biases. She takes this concept even farther and very cleverly in *The Watershed* by injecting her family directly into the story from the beginning instead of what felt slightly like an afterthought in *Seeds*. The result is a very entertaining play, emotionally and intellectually, that both criticizes and defends everyone involved. It's a political play through a personal lens, which is very much the kind of quality Canada is known for. Or rather, the quality many of us wish it was still known for.

In *The Watershed*, Soutar (played by Kristen Thomson) enlists her husband Alex Ivanovici (playing himself) and their two daughters Ella (Amelia Sargisson) and Beatrice (Ngozi Paul) to help her research her next play, which will be about water, in some way. Quickly she latches onto the story of the Experimental Lakes Area, a world-renowned centre for research on lake water, which had its funding cut suddenly by the Conservative government in 2012. As Soutar learns more about the players involved in the ensuing outcry, she draws connections from this small facility to the oilsands (or tarsands, depending on where your personal bias lies), to the economy, to our dominant ideologies, to the very way we live our lives.

Soutar must have wielded a very large red pen in the writing phase, since the sensitive ELA issue is handled with clarity and a lean delivery of key information—including technical speak from experts, rousing speeches from activists like Maude Barlow, and a devil's advocate in her own Conservative Party—donor father. But she includes more than enough humour to keep the whole show feeling very light. Sometimes the cultural Canadian touchstones feel a little too easy: Stephen Harper (Bruce Dinsmore) singing "I Get By With a Little Help From My Friends" around a campfire, an opening essay by Jian Ghomeshi (Dinsmore again, in an impression that's nauseatingly good, leather cuff and all), or ending an excerpt of *Here and Now* with Soutar proclaiming, "Carol, off!"

Actually, it's Soutar's daughters who often steal the scene. Paul and Sargisson pull off their concurrent curiosity in watersheds, investigative journalism, and *Frozen* with a very endearing honesty. Tanja Jacobs is also hilarious as the brash Hazel, the daughter of director Chris Abraham, who joins them on their trip across Canada to Fort McMurray.

With Julie Fox's sparse set of wood, plastic piping, and porcelain home fixtures (a tub, a toilet, and a sink) that transforms from the Soutar/Ivanovici home into the Winnebago they drive across the country, effective projections by Denyse Karn, lighting by Kimberly Purtell, and sound by Thomas Ryder Payne (Patrick Watson's "Adventures in Your Own Backyard" is a very apt anthem), the production is even more carefully edited than the script.

This is very good theatre. But what *The Watershed* does that makes it great is that it removes any possibility for it to remain theoretical. Even the inclusion of Soutar's real family doesn't guarantee that it will necessarily hit home for everyone in the audience. What did, at least for us, was the ingenious inclusion of director Chris Abraham (played by Paul, stroking a terrible fake beard) who openly advises Soutar to be more careful in the way she talks about the play and the ELA conflict to major governmental players, as Crow's has a million-dollar grant at stake to fund their new theatre under construction at Dundas and Carlaw—the banners and pamphlets for which ornament the Berkeley Street Theatre lobby steps away. He's committing the mortal sin of an art-maker, letting government pressure influence the work he and others make. But we also sympathize with his position and the fear over jeopardizing the future of the project. But then again, isn't our constant drive to grow, expand, and consume the very behaviour that's putting our ecological resources in danger, and perpetuating the argument that economy rules over all other priorities?

And that's what *The Watershed* is really about, what we're willing to give up for another's benefit, and why it's so hard to change our minds. Soutar uses the political to reflect very deeply on the personal, in a bravely honest way. This is the kind of Canadian we hope becomes the norm, and not the exception.

(Side note: There's also another moment that feels all too real: when a key interview is cancelled at the last minute, Soutar melts down in front of her family with a curse-ridden rant. We feel you, Annabel, we feel you.)



Theatre review: Despite the topic, nothing dry about The Watershed



[Jim Burke, Special to Montreal Gazette](#)

[More from Jim Burke, Special to Montreal Gazette](#)

Published on: November 11, 2016 | Last Updated: November 11, 2016 12:03 PM EST



Daniel Brochu and Liisa Repo-Martell in *The Watershed* at the Centaur Theatre. Porte Parole

Is this a trend?

At the Segal last week, Marc Hall attended the opening night of *Prom Queen: The Musical*, which dramatized his defiance of a Catholic school ban on partying with his same-sex partner.

A week later at the Centaur, the family of playwright Annabel Soutar was in the audience for the part-environmental docudrama, part comedy road trip *The Watershed*, her daughters giggling delightedly as what-they-did-on-their-holidays unfolded on the stage.

What raises both plays above the status of theatrical selfies is that they wrestle with momentous political issues, both of which, incidentally, have just been thrown for a loop by developments across the border.

In *The Watershed*, Soutar and her Montreal-based documentary-theatre company Porte Parole (in a co-production with Toronto's Crow's Theatre) investigate the future of Canada's fresh water supply — in particular its imperilment by the drip-drip of neglect by the Harper government.

As with other Porte Parole shows like *Seeds* and *Fredy*, Soutar herself is a central character, forcefully played here in a mixture of doggedness and self-doubt by Liisa Repo-Martell, as she interviews politicians, environmentalists and interested bystanders in an effort to understand why an internationally esteemed research project, the Experimental Lakes Area, is being defunded.

Soutar's real-life actor husband, Alex Ivanovici, was to have played himself until a broken ankle put him out of action. He's been replaced by Daniel Brochu, who brings an enjoyable mix of vulnerability, short-fuse irritability and physical comedy.

Humour, in fact, plays a crucial role in diluting the potentially hard-to-swallow muesli of facts and figures. Hysterical weather reports, ironically from climate change-denying network Fox News, are raucously delivered by Tanja Jacobs, who also gets lots of comic mileage out of playing the Soutar girls' older friend, Hazel.

Amusingly recognizable cameos drift in and out, most notably Bruce Dinsmore's impeccably bland Stephen Harper.



Left to right: Daniel Brochu, Liisa Repo-Martell and Eric Peterson in the Watershed at the Centaur Theatre. Porte Parole

The second half shifts gear into often madcap domestic comedy as the Soutar family and their (invisible) dog pile into a rented Winnebago for an epic journey across Canada so Soutar can see for herself the Alberta oilsands and their environmental impact.

Denyse Karn's elaborately inventive, often witty projection design, combined with Julie Fox's shape-shifting set (Plateau apartment, Winnebago interior, sushi bar ...) also add spectacular and colourful variety.

The eight-strong cast undergo split-second transformations as they portray scores of characters. In one delightful episode, Ngozi Paul switches suddenly from a pre-teen girl enjoying a bath to a bearded Chris Abraham, the director of the show, also taking a bath but agonizing over such grown-up problems as the impact of The Watershed's controversy on his company's funding.

Such moments of introspection are typical of a show that, on the one hand, takes an objective look at hot-button political issues, and on the other wrestles with its own creative process.

It even has its own criticism built into it. There's a climactic debate between Soutar and her fiscally conservative father, Ian. The scene is gripping, beautifully acted and made doubly poignant by the fact Ian is played by beloved veteran Eric Peterson, and by the fact the real Ian Soutar died this year. But it also starts to feel like it's going all over the map. At which point, Peterson's character remarks: "We're all over the map here."

It's difficult not to argue with that as an overall assessment, while acknowledging that it's an enjoyable, often thoughtfully stimulating trip.

AT A GLANCE: *The Watershed* plays to Dec. 4 at Centaur Theatre, 453 St-François-Xavier St. Tickets: \$51 (Thursday, Friday, Saturday evenings), \$45 (Tuesday, Wednesday evenings), \$39 (matinee), seniors: \$43.50 (evening), \$38 (matinee), under 30: \$36.50, students: \$28. Call 514-288-3161 or visit centaurtheatre.com

If you want to learn more about the Experimental Lakes Area and freshwater science, there's a pre-matinee Sunday Chat-Up at noon on Nov. 13 with Montreal Gazette editor Lucinda Chodan in conversation with Annabel Soutar and environmental professor Beatrix Beisner. Admission is free.

<http://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/theatre-review-despite-the-topic-nothing-dry-about-the-watershed>

CBCnews | Montreal

The politics of water take centre stage in Centaur's *The Watershed*

Playwright Annabel Soutar takes her family to the oil sands in her quest for sustainable watersheds

By Kristin Falcao, [CBC News](#) Posted: Nov 10, 2016 8:20 AM ET Last Updated: Nov 10, 2016 8:20 AM ET



Daniel Brochu plays Alex Ivanovici and Liisa Repo-Martell plays Annabel Soutar in the *Watershed* (Kristin Falcao/CBC)

How much do we value clean water in Canada, and what are we willing to sacrifice in order to preserve it? That's the focus of a new documentary play, *The Watershed*, opening at Centaur theatre.

Montreal's Porte Parole documentary theatre company teamed up with Toronto's Crow Theatre for the production.

The play follows playwright Annabel Soutar (played by Liisa Repo-Martell), who takes her husband, two young girls and their friend on a cross-Canada trip to the oil sands, to ask tough questions about fresh water preservation.

'I thought maybe if there's more of a personal angle in the play, it will just touch a deeper nerve.' - *Annabel Soutar, playwright*

Soutar's plays include the hugely successful *Seeds*, which tells the story of a farmer's legal battle against the biotech giant Monsanto.

Porte Parole's productions are based on interviews done by Soutar, conversations she's had, information gathered from the media, and other official documents.

Soutar admits people will sometimes avoid documentaries, because they may be perceived as an intellectual or educational exercise.



Ngozi Paul who plays Beatrice, and Amelia Sargisson who plays Ella, are overjoyed when they find out they are missing school to drive across Canada in *The Watershed* (CBC)

In *The Watershed*, she decided to use her family's experience driving to the oil sands to talk about water resources in Canada.

"I thought maybe if there's more of a personal angle in the play, it will just touch a deeper nerve," Soutar said.

"People will see how their everyday actions with their families in their homes, actually have an effect on the future of freshwater."

Travelling for weeks in a Winnebago isn't the most economical mode of transportation.

The disconnect between wanting to save the environment, and the reality of daily consumption is a conversation Soutar and her husband Alex Ivanovici wanted to entice.



Alex Ivanovici and Annabel Soutar are the founders of Montreal's documentary theatre company Porte Parole (Eloi Savoie)

"The conflict between our personal values and what we do to survive, and the excuses we make to go against our own values because our society is allowing us to," said Ivanovici, who is also the co-founder of Porte Parole. "The beauty of it is [the play] is capturing us struggling with it, something people can identify with."

Ivanovici, a professional actor, was playing himself in the play, until he broke his fibula during rehearsal in Toronto, when he fell off the stage. Actor Daniel Brochu has stepped in to play his part.



Liisa Repo-Martell who plays Annabel Soutar and Eric Peterson who plays Ian Soutar talk politics in *The Watershed*. (CBC)

Soutar's leftist views are contradicted in the play by her father, Ian Soutar, a conservative investment manager played by Eric Peterson, known for his roles in *Street Legal* and *Corner Gas*.

"You will be intellectually stimulated, and you will be probably be emotionally stimulated too," Peterson said.

"And connected in a stronger way to the way that you actually live, through this play."

Petersen says it's always a big responsibility playing a real person, but even more so in *The Watershed* because Ian Soutar passed away in March.



The Soutar-Ivanovici family head across Canada to investigate the oil sands and ask questions about fresh water in *The Watershed* (CBC)

Annabel Soutar says seeing her conversations with her father reenacted on stage is bittersweet.

"I feel lucky in a way that I got to honour him before he passed away," says Soutar.

"I get to share who I believe he was, especially with the Montreal community because he was very well loved here."

The Watershed runs at the Centaur theatre from Nov. 10 to Dec. 4.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/watershed-centaur-annabel-soutar-1.3844411>

The best, and worst, of the Canadian stage for 2016



Irene Sankoff and David Hein's *Come From Away* at Mirvish Royal Alexandra Theatre is a complex and original, yet undeniably accessible and feel-good step forward for Canadian commercial theatre.

MATTHEW MURPHY

J. KELLY NESTRUCK >
DECEMBER 23, 2016



As the year comes to a close, it's easy to feel bullish about Canadian theatre with shows made in this country popping up on best-of-2016 lists internationally.

Victoria-born musical *Ride the Cyclone* made The New York Times list of best theatre of 2016, while Crystal Pite and Jonathon Young's exquisite dance-theatre piece *Betroffenheit* topped the Guardian's list of dance. *Counting Sheep*, a Toronto-

born musical about unrest in Ukraine that played in Edinburgh and is gearing up for a larger tour, landed on influential critic Matt Trueman's list of best theatre in Britain, too.

Back at home, meanwhile, I found this was one of those years where it was hard to whittle my favourite shows down to a top 10. (Other years, I've had to stretch to reach that number.)

Here's what I came up with, in no particular order, from what I saw this year in Toronto and at the Stratford Festival and Shaw Festival – the part of the country I cover most comprehensively.

1. Come from Away, Royal Alexandra Theatre

Complex and original, yet undeniably accessible and feel-good, this Broadway-bound musical is a significant step forward for Canadian commercial theatre. Irene Sankoff and David Hein's 9/11 show selling out the Royal Alexandra in Toronto was a milestone – as very few Canadian musicals had even played in this 1907 theatre before.

Attending an emotional, sold-out, special performance of *Come from Away* at a hockey arena in Gander, Nfld. – where the show is set – would land on the top-10 theatrical experiences of my life, however.

Read [the review](#).

2. The James Plays, Luminato

The National Theatre of Scotland's latest visit to Toronto was with these three plays by Rona Munro about three Scottish kings in the 15th century – in which the playwright mimicked, subverted and overthrew the conventions of the history play.

It was the conversation between the shows, the accumulation of details, the slow then startling shifts in tone that made a marathon viewing such a memorable experience – augmented, of course, by it taking place over 11 hours in a decommissioned generating station in Toronto's Port Lands area.

Read [the review](#).

3. Father Comes Home from the Wars (Parts I, II and III), Soulpepper

Another great, three-part historical saga by an international playwright. Suzan-Lori Parks's drama about an enslaved man who must decide whether to fight for the system of slavery in order to achieve his personal freedom got a terrific Canadian premiere from director Weyni Mengesha at Soulpepper.

Read [the review](#).

4. "Master Harold" ... and the Boys, Shaw Festival/Obsidian Theatre

Athol Fugard's three-hander about life in South Africa in the infancy of apartheid got a very unsettling, outraging production first in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., then in Toronto. Director Philip Akin elicited excellent performances from Allan Louis and André Sills – and squeezed a reputation-making turn out of young James Daly as "Master Harold."

Read [the review](#).

5. A Doll's House, Soulpepper

A classic made contemporary through performance rather than adaptation, director Daniel Brooks's production of this Ibsen chestnut felt particularly vital because of its tour-de-force central performance by an unchained Katherine Gauthier as a Nora more action figure than doll.

Read [the review](#).

6. All My Sons, Stratford Festival / Incident at Vichy, Soulpepper

I saw these two exceptional productions of Arthur Miller plays in quick succession, reviewed them together – and it's hard for me to separate them in my mind. Directors Martha Henry, in Stratford, and Alan Dilworth, at Soulpepper, found what was crucial and contemporary in them. *All My Sons* had the most immediate emotional impact, but I think about the chilling question at the centre of *Incident at Vichy* almost every day: How will we know when the thing we fear is actually happening?

Read [the review](#).

7. Macbeth, Stratford Festival

I've always liked the Scottish play on the page, but had never seen a truly satisfying production on the stage until director Antoni Cimolino's at the Stratford Festival. The keys to its success: A furious pace, an ingeniously placed intermission and a focus on the larger world of the play rather than a star performance.

Read [the review](#).

8. Mouthpiece, Quote Unquote Collective

Norah Sadava and Amy Nostbakken wowed me with this funny, physical, political (and tuneful, too!) two-hander about how to talk about women and how women talk. Calgary and Vancouver, it's headed your way – check it out at the High Performance Rodeo and the PuSh Festival, respectively, in early 2017.

Read [the review](#).

9. The Watershed, Porte Parole/Crow's Theatre

I missed Annabel Soutar's documentary play about the so-called war on science in the Harper era when it premiered in 2015, but caught up with it this year. Sprawling, funny, smart – its themes about political polarization endure. It's still on tour and you can catch it in Winnipeg, Calgary and Richmond, B.C., in 2017.

Read Martin Morrow's [original 2015 review](#).

10. Salt-Water Moon, Factory Theatre

I bought tickets so I could go back and see director Ravi Jain's sensuous, stripped-down production of this 1984 David French play. I loved it the second time, too. It was the highlight of a revelatory "naked season" of Canadian classics at Factory Theatre, revived by artistic director Nina Lee Aquino.

In a list that went to 11, the "naked" revival of *A Line in the Sand* would also squeak in – and one that stretched to 12 would include another show directed by Jain, *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* by Lisa Codrington.

Read [the review](#).

Flops of the year

Alice in Wonderland, Shaw Festival

A mind-numbing mainstage misfire from director Peter Hinton. I shudder to think how many young theatregoers attending as part of school groups have now been put off live theatre forever.

Read [the review](#).

Paramour, Cirque du Soleil

Quebec's circus company tried to break into Broadway musical theatre – but somehow thought it could get away without hiring a writer. Memorably bad, at least.

Read [the review](#).

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Winnipeg Free Press

The Arts

Art imitates life in journalist's verbatim stage play

Verbatim play tackles Experimental Lakes dispute

By: [Randall King](#)

Posted: 03/15/2017 5:09 PM | Last Modified: 03/16/2017 7:19 AM | [Updates](#) | [Comments: 1](#)

Reporters are generally uncomfortable when their own first-person experiences start to bleed into the third-person narratives they're creating.

That is evidently not the case with journalist-playwright Annabel Soutar of the Montreal theatre company Porte Parole when it came to her play *The Watershed*.

Like her work *Seeds* (seen last year at Prairie Theatre Exchange), the two-hour-and-45-minute opus (including intermission) is a verbatim play, in which the dialogue has been transcribed from real interviews, or real life.

By necessity, Soutar inserted herself into *Seeds* on occasion in a necessary acknowledgment that the story of Saskatchewan farmer Percy Schmeiser's battle with agri-giant Monsanto did not happen in a vacuum. The character of Annabel Soutar was duly seen arranging and conducting interviews, and also interjecting here and there to helpfully correct any inaccurate or misleading statement uttered by a character.

Soutar promotes herself to the harried heroine of *The Watershed*, a work that examines the issue of water stewardship. It centres on the dispute that arose when Stephen Harper's Conservative government pulled the plug on the Experimental Lakes Area project in 2013, a decision that appeared to be motivated by sheer spite rather than conscientious cost-cutting, especially given the world-class research being conducted there.

Soutar's expanded role, encompassing her husband, her two daughters and her parents, should not be considered a vanity move. The issue is one of posterity. In a world facing many scary crises due to climate change, Soutar is simply offering herself up to provide a vital sense of context as a parent deeply concerned with the environmental/economic legacy we will leave our children.

Soutar (Liisa Repo-Martell, once Ophelia to Keanu Reeves's Hamlet at Royal MTC some years ago) has booked a commission by the 2015 Pan Am Games to do a work on the subject of water resources.

To that end, we see her arrange a visit by a plumber to educate her two daughters as to how water gets to their house. Once Soutar hears of the imminent closure of the Experimental Lakes Area, she uncovers a tangled system of conflicting agendas, where access to safe water bumps up against the voracious needs of the oil industry, and the benign pursuits of science crash against the rocks of political expediency.

The second act, which details a Montreal-to-Alberta road trip with Soutar's family, feels like a distraction – as if an earnest eco-documentary has been interrupted by a PG-rated road comedy. It takes a while before it gets back on track, but it's a credit to director Chris Abraham of Toronto's Crow's Theatre that we stick with it. As he did with *Seeds*, Abraham sets an urgent pace for the eight actors on stage, most of them playing multiple roles. (One can't help admire the way Abraham portrays himself as a character, an artistic director of a theatre company who comes to the unnerving realization that federal funding for his own organization is in the hands of a political party with a penchant for payback.)

The cast is superb. Bruce Dinsmore plays multiple roles, but he is especially funny as former PM Harper, a man who tried to present as a non-threatening authority figure but always radiated as being somehow... off. Eric Peterson also plays multiple roles, including a bombastic Fox News anchor and a water scientist whose unfiltered candour on the subject of the oil sands may have turned the Harper government in vengeful mode. He is especially affecting as Soutar's Tory father, respectfully trying to make his liberal daughter understand the conservative viewpoint without a hint of anger or condescension. (It's an especially civilized pleasure to witness this dialogue in an age of puerile "libtard" name-calling.)

Molly Kidder is also notable in her multiple roles, including Soutar's eldest daughter, but she is especially poignant as a student-scientist whose reaction to the ELA closure is one of deeply felt betrayal.

If anyone is cynical enough to think Kidder was stunt-cast because her Peterson happens to be her father, she puts that notion to rest with a combination of emotional availability and consummate skill. She deserves to be on that stage.

<http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/entertainment/arts/nothing-dry-in-water-focused-drama-416275014.html>