



LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

Hannah Moscovitch first earned acclaim with her two SummerWorks plays, *Essay* and *The Russian Play*. The Ottawa native calls herself "lucky" to have all of her recent success.

## THEATRE

# This playwright has arrived

She may be only 29, but the outspoken Hannah Moscovitch unveils her first full-length play next week

RICHARD OUZOUNIAN  
THEATRE CRITIC

Hannah Moscovitch is all about contradictions.

She sits at the Luna Café, known for making some of the best coffee in Toronto — and drinks tea.

She was raised as an atheist — but remains "incredibly attached" to her Jewish heritage.

And while claiming to be "unbelievably nervous" about being interviewed, she proves to be one of the most forthcoming subjects you could ask for.

The 29-year-old playwright is at the start of what will prove to be a banner year for her. Next Wednesday night, Tarragon Theatre presents the world premiere of her play *East of Berlin* and, early next year, Factory Theatre will be mounting a double bill of her SummerWorks successes from 2005-'06, *Essay* and *The Russian Play*.

She also has been commissioned to provide works for five other theatres as well as work on a radio series for CBC.

Some authors labour all their lives without reaching such a tipping point, but here is Moscovitch at the start of her career and already nicely famous.

"I'm very lucky," she shrugs, "what else can I say? I'm young and grateful for all the opportunities. I've got more than enough ideas. I'm just a little bit lacking in time."

Her parents are as good a place as any to begin unravelling "The Moscovitch Puzzle," because they certainly provided her with a distinctive upbringing.

"They were real left-wingers," Moscovitch explains. "Hippies, actually. Our house was a kind of commune until I was born. There were 13 people living in our house — and building bombs in the basement. Just kidding."

"But we did have a Food Share operation in the house where we shared what we made with the neighbourhood."

She describes her father as "a professor of social policy and economics in the Social Work department at Carleton" and her mother as "a feminist witch. No, really, that's what she did for a living. She also wrote non-fiction research books about things like 'Women and Part-Time Work' and now she's finally got a real 9-to-5 job."

Their influence on their daughter was strong, because she recalls "arguing with my grammar school

## GETTING PERSONAL WITH HANNAH MOSCOVITCH

### 1. What was your first job?

I was a teenager in Ottawa and I worked at a beading store, helping upper-middle-class Ottawans to make their own jewellery and exercise their bad taste.

### 2. If you weren't an actor, what would you be doing?

My panic button is lawyer. If you have something to prove, you go to law school and you have to admit the degree is pretty attractive. There's also a performance element about it that theatre people tend to be drawn to. But I also think I'd really like to be a war journalist.

### 3. What's on your iPod?

I don't have an iPod. I'm not very technical. My brother and daddy had to set up my laptop for me. But I listen to a lot of music. Right

now, No. 1 is Joanna Newsome. I read she was "The It Girl of Freak Folk," which I thought sounded awesome. I also listen to a lot of Bach, believe it or not. I love it.

### 4. What's the last good movie you saw?

*The Lives of Others*. It does what I try so hard to do with my plays. It allows space within the art for the audience to have a creative role in what the story means.

### 5. What TV show must you watch every week?

I don't have a television but I watch it sometimes on my laptop. *Arrested Development* is my latest find and *Band of Brothers* was really good as well. You see, that's the war journalist gene in me coming through again.

Richard Ouzounian



A scene from the acclaimed series *Band of Brothers*.

teachers that there ought to be more than one bathroom pass, otherwise it was unfair and cruel."

But her artistic side was already making itself felt and she also remembers "doing plays in the living room, selling tickets to my parents and forcing my brother and the cat into costumes."

When adolescence came along, however, it was not Moscovitch's finest hour.

"I didn't know how to do high school," she fumes. "I didn't get it. It didn't make sense to me. It was all about social. No one was really interested in learning, not even the teachers, really."

When asked to recall her lowest

point, she thinks a minute, then delivers this:

"I remember one nightmare moment. I had an in-class 15-minute argument with my teacher as to whether fascism and communism were the same or different. I was being childish and passionate and I suddenly realized that everybody else in the class was bored and just hated me."

After graduation, she auditioned for the National Theatre School in Montreal, but when she didn't get in, "It set me on fire, so I went to Israel and worked on a kibbutz for four months."

Moscovitch admits to wondering at her motives. As she says, "I had

no real goals then. When you're 18, all you can do is be 18."

Things were made more difficult by her heritage.

"My parents were atheists, which made things confusing. My father was very attached to Judaism, but my mother wasn't even Jewish. She's one of these atheists who doesn't get religion."

Moscovitch sums up her time in Israel by saying, "It's so complicated there," and shares the fact that "after four months, my feeling was, 'Get me out of here!'"

So she returned to Canada, re-auditioned for the NTS and got in, only to discover that she was more suited to playwriting than acting.

"I don't think I was a very good actor. I had moments when I managed to pull it off, but I'm actually terribly self-conscious, which isn't the best quality for an actor to have."

After graduation, she moved to Toronto and, surprisingly, landed a job "at Teatro on College St. It was swank and snooty. All the other girls were so hot and I was fresh out of the hay from Ottawa."

She spent nearly five years there, waitressing on and off, while working on her playwriting as well as a degree in literature at U of T.

Her breakthrough came when her play *Essay* got rave reviews and packed houses at the 2005 SummerWorks Festival and then *The Russian Play* repeated it the next year.

But now, it's time for her first full-length play, *East of Berlin*, and the idea came to her quite directly.

"I was reading a book about the children of Nazis called *The Legacy of Silence*. If you've been handed that as your birthright, how do you manoeuvre through life?"

"All of the children on both sides have had to come to an understanding of this. That's what fascinates me. The stakes of the Holocaust are the highest in our lifetime; that's why so much has been written about it."

She looks up from her tea, eyes blazing. "What's the fallout from all of this? How does it communicate to the next generation?"

There's no answer, but that doesn't seem to bother her. In Hannah Moscovitch's world, the questions are more important.

*East of Berlin* runs at the Tarragon Theatre, 30 Bridgman Ave., until Nov. 25. For tickets, call 416-531-1827.

## THE ESSENTIALS

### 1978

Born in Ottawa on June 5.

### 1996

Graduated high school; spent four months on a kibbutz in Israel.

### 2001

Graduated from the National Theatre School.

### 2002-'06

Waitressed at Teatro on College St. while working on a B.A. in Literature at the University of Toronto.

### 2005

*Essay* produced at Rhubarb and SummerWorks.

### 2006

*The Russian Play* produced at SummerWorks.

### 2007

*East of Berlin* produced at Tarragon Theatre.

### 2008

Double bill of *Essay* and *The Russian Play* to be produced at Factory Theatre.