

AN INTERVIEW WITH WRITER RITA KALNEJAIS

Tell us a little of what *Babyteeth* is about.

Babyteeth is a love story. I wanted to write about how love undoes you and makes you honest.

A thumbnail plot might be: a fourteen year-old girl with cancer falls in love with a young junkie and while she's experiencing the love of her life her family is coming to terms with the fact she is dying, that she is growing up and that life cannot be controlled. Everyone falls in love in this play. It's a very dark comedy but I just wanted to learn about love in the face of loss and the intensity and wonder of that.

It's also about: Loving like you've got nothing to lose, how precious life is, how precious people are, how living intimately with death brings that into focus and that with life, you know there will be death and you know that love will seize you.

Where do the characters come from?

When writing this the characters were very insistent and I found them really domineering. So there is a psychiatrist father and wild young ex-junkie and a no-apologies Latvian violinist and a fourteen year-old girl with big dreams and a mother who eats when she's anxious and shakes with too much feeling. And they are absolutely me, my exes, friends, teachers, people I've loved or at least known. But I didn't pick anyone and say you'll be a good character in this world. They pieced themselves together from remembered and forgotten memories and somehow peopled this world. Suddenly there was a Latvian man with a picture of his brother's wife in lingerie atop his piano, swearing and making love, and a girl with a violin case standing on a train platform about to meet the love of her life. They sort of knew who they were from the start and they remind me of people, of people I've known and loved and slept with as much as anyone else.

What research did you do?

I was in consistent contact with some very extraordinary, inspiring palliative care nurses and medical specialists. And of course read lots of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, Franz Wright... googled obsessively, because I wanted the play to be very grounded. And I spoke with people who were living with cancer. When I was 21 a dear friend died of lymphatic cancer after a struggle in which she seemed to reach a wisdom and brilliance that was far beyond my understanding at the time. She fell in love, really loved who she loved, wore blue bikinis in unlikely circumstances, painted, danced a lot to James Brown, stained her lips with mulberry juice. She ate it all up. I've spent most of my adult life in dialogue with that experience and this play is a big question about what her experience was. I've always been interested in the perspective death gives life. But really this isn't a play about cancer anymore than it's a play about the violin, or being unable to get the clasp of your bra undone when you want to have illicit sex with your husband on his desk. These are the conditions. But ultimately it's about intimacy and how people love. And how kind the world is.

You've been an actor, that's how you're known to Belvoir audiences. Why have you started writing?

Acting for me is like this very wonderful affair where I get to feel reckless and emotional and fascinated by the world I'm in. But writing feels like a much deeper fact of me. If you're writing you have to be honest and you constantly reach the limits of your understanding and as a job description you have to be curious. It's a discipline in empathy as well. You have to enter everything emotionally but then when characters are going further than you would ever feel safe to go say: do what you have to do. Love how you have to love. Learn what you have to learn. Just give the audiences pleasure. Please.