When asked how she ended up becoming a playwright and documentary theater producer, Annabel Soutar recalls a chance outing to McCarter Theatre when she was a sophomore. She saw Anna Deveare Smith’s documentary play *Fires in the Mirror* and she was struck with a realization: “Theater is an exceptionally rare space where our polarized society can listen to a plurality of voices and develop true curiosity about, and empathy for, the other.” An English major with a certificate in Theater & Dance, Soutar wrote her first documentary play for her thesis.

After teaching and traveling in Asia following graduation, she returned to her hometown of Montreal to find her city deeply divided after a referendum on Quebec’s separation from Canada. She also found an artistic community suspicious of her Americanized accent and completely unfamiliar with documentary theater. After four years of learning to speak French again, getting to know the community, and finding artistic “accomplices,” in 2000 she launched Porte Parole Productions with her first professional documentary play about the fragile state of democracy in Quebec. That production, *Novembre*, was nominated by the prestigious Académie Québécoise du Théâtre for an award in the “Revelation of the Year” category. Now twenty years and fifteen productions later, Porte Parole is one of Quebec’s most celebrated theater companies, with plays touring across Canada, the U.S. and Europe.
Soutar approaches her playwriting and productions as journalistic investigations, aspiring to tackle some of the 21st century’s thorniest issues—health care, energy production, racial profiling, immigration, and climate change. Moved by her audience’s appetite for stories that challenge their biases and expose them to opposing points of view, she finds them “hungry for a space where opposing voices co-habit,” in rebellion against an ideologically fragmented news media ecosystem.

What started as a small local company co-founded with her husband, Soutar’s creation has grown into a significant enterprise, with full-time staff, a twelve-person board and a global point of view. Soutar has had to set aside her own writing time as she has developed expertise in key areas of nonprofit arts management, including fundraising, finance, strategic planning and governance. She has been an advisor to the Dean of Concordia University’s Fine Arts Department and sat on the board of the Montreal Arts Council for three years, where she addressed the impact on funding in an arts community with sharply divided stakeholders. In that environment, she notes, she “reads slowly, listens carefully, and takes a deep breath before voicing her opinions.”

Her success has brought her international acclaim and respect from her peers. She is sought after as a collaborator with other playwrights and producers. Soutar has become a mentor to many young artists and now also teaches workshops throughout the world, including speaking about her documentary writing process at Princeton’s Festival of French Theater in 2016. She was entertained to find herself speaking French, her second
language, in the place where more than twenty years earlier she had gone to escape her Francophone hometown.

Throughout her career, Soutar has been reminded how interdisciplinary learning and critical thinking were hallmarks of her Princeton education and how they “continue to influence [her] creative voice as a theater artist and producer.” She has maintained ties with the University through active involvement with the Alumni Association’s Regional Quebec Chapter, having served for ten years as the Chapter president and continuing to interview prospective students. As Chapter President she was happy to represent Princeton, albeit remotely, to alumni and give them a sense of community and connection despite their being far away from campus, and she considers it a “privilege and opportunity to mobilize students living in Montreal.”