



ASHES TO ASHES

A CLASSIC SCREWBALL COMEDY BY DEBBIE BOLSKY DIRECTED BY KATHERINE JAMES WAS NURTURED BY THEATRICUM'S SEEDLINGS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM. Above, *Ashes to Ashes* cast from left: Lena Bouton as Sara, Michael Uribes as the guide and Kevin Young as Jefferson. Photo by Ed Krieger

BY CLAIRE FORDHAM

A play that germinated in a Theatricum Botanicum Seedlings workshop has premiered at L.A.'s Odyssey Theater. The comedy, "Ashes to Ashes," written by Debbie Bolsky, follows the unlikely romance between liberal Sara and right-winger Jefferson. They disagree about everything—except their love and devotion for their two, newly deceased, filthy-rich best friends. Trapped by the time constraints of their friends' will, the two are forced to spend the next 16 days, 21 hours and 32 minutes together, scattering ashes across Europe.

Bolsky has penned 11 stage plays and screenplays. They all feature strong and layered roles for women and explore themes as diverse as death, baseball and politics. She began writing *Ashes to Ashes* before the presidential election.

"It has always been a screwball comedy about two people who are complete opposites and forced into this situation, the standard opposites-attract story," said Bolsky. "I layered in their political differences as a part of their divisiveness even before the election, because our country has been heading that way for a while. And having civil conversations about those differences is impossible. That seemed ripe for creating two characters who fall in love."

The playwright says live theater is especially important today, when so many prefer to watch their entertainment on a screen. "There is nothing like watching good live theatre," said Bolsky. "It's intimate and can make you forget that what you are watching is not real."

The Topanga connection was vital. "The Seedlings development process was invaluable," says Bolsky. "There were three playwrights, along with Jennie Webb (who oversaw us all), and we each had a play at different stages of development. This was a safe environment to discuss our plays and get constructive feedback. I know it helped me see 'Ashes to Ashes' from a different vantage point and I don't know where the play would be without Seedlings."

"As an added bonus, Katherine James was one of the three writers and fell in love with 'Ashes to Ashes,' and is now directing it."

Katherine James has been acting, writing and directing for most of her life. For her, teamwork is key. "I am a big collaborator who requires big creative brains to play with," said James. "The workshop we did of

the play this summer and the entire rehearsal process is one of discovery through collaboration. Just the other day, I realized the actors were trying to fulfill some blocking I had put in a while ago in the process of working on the scene. They felt compelled to justify it because I was 'the director.' I laughed and said, 'The only thing I'm married to is my husband. If this isn't serving us any more, let's throw it out and just play with it.' What they came up with, once 'freed,' is simply brilliant."

James and her husband, Alan Blumenfeld, have been members of Theatricum for 30 years and founded the Free Association Theatre Company together. James said, "I love that Theatricum is a place where I can be in a Shakespeare classic one season, a modern classic the next, and nurture my own writing and the writing of other playwrights in the Seedlings program."

"*Ashes to Ashes*" is written in the tradition of classic film screwball comedies, but with a highly theatrical bent, says James. "You know from the minute you walk in that these two people are going to end up in love—yet how that happens is so surprising and the journey is so much fun that the audience is all in."

Lena Bouton stars as Sara, opposite Kevin Young as Jefferson. Michael Uribes takes on the role of the mysterious, chameleon-like and hilarious "guide" who shepherds the couple from country to country and task to task.

"At the holiday time of the year, we want to escape for a few hours to laugh, have fun, maybe shed a brief tear, and remember how to fall in love all over again. Debbie Bolsky lets everyone who sees *Ashes to Ashes* do just that," said James.

Bolsky, James and Theatricum playwright-in-residence Jennie Webb are all members of the Los Angeles Female Playwrights Initiative, as well as the Athena Cats, a collective of Southern California female playwrights and directors presenting this romantic comedy at L.A.'s Odyssey Theatre. ■

"*Ashes to Ashes*" runs through January 14 on Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. (dark December 24 and December 31). There will be two additional performances on Thursday, December 21 and Thursday, December 28, both at 8 p.m. All tickets are \$30 (reserved seating).

The Odyssey Theatre is located at 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., West Los Angeles, 90025. For reservations and information, call 310 564 9410 or go to www.AshesToAshesThePlay.com.