

Interview: Arye Gross Watching BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA & More

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By Gil Kaan



The Los Angeles premiere of Anna Ouyang Moench's *Birds of North America* opens September 23, 2023, at The Odyssey Theatre (with previews starting September 20th). Peter Richards directs this narrative of a father and daughter relationship with the cast of Arye Gross and Jacqueline Misaye. I got the chance to examine some of Arye's views on *Birds* and his eventful theatrical career.

Thank you for taking time for this interview, Arye.

My pleasure, Gil!

What initially attracted you to the role of John?

The writing is fantastic. Anna is a great writer; there's a precision and insight in every word the characters speak (and don't speak). John is a tremendous part for actors "of a certain age" (and these seem to be fewer and farther apart as time marches on). I love his intelligence, his somewhat hobbled "emotional intelligence," his love for his wife, his daughter, the world.

What qualities of his could you most relate to?

Probably his passion for D.I.Y.!

What other traits of John's made you expand your thinking to include his point of view?

Well, he just knows SO much about so many things! His thoughts on "fixing" soccer, hockey and basketball, on ways to improve those games, are all particularly fascinating to me.

Are there aspects of John and Caitlyn’s relationship that mirror yours and our daughters?

I don’t think any work I do is not in some way a reflection of relationships in my life; so, yes, I’m sure there may be certain aspects that line up with the play. But I certainly wouldn’t want to name them, even if I could.

What is your three-line pitch for Birds of North America be?

“A father and daughter, in 10 scenes over the course of about 10 years, navigate their relationship and their divergent views of the world. How do you nurture and sustain familial love and relationships across time in an increasingly polarized world?”

Had you seen any of Anna Ouyang Moench’s previous works?

Sadly, no. Not her plays anyway. (I had plans to see Man of God at East/West Players in 2019, but those plans were foiled when I was offered The Great Leap at ACT with BD Wong and Tim Liu. (Tim’s currently touring in Cambodian Rock Band and both CRB and Birds have Dengue references — a little something for the obsessively observant.) I was a big fan, however, and am very much looking forward to the second season of Severance.

I have seen only a few of your many Los Angeles theatre productions (M. Butterfly at East West in 2004, Parfumerie at The Wallis in 2013, Underneath the Lintel: An Impressive Presentation of Lovely Evidences at the Geffen in 2017). Have you worked with any of the Birds cast or creatives before?

Other than (Odyssey Theatre producer) Beth Hogan, and Lucy Pollak, this is a whole new crew for me. I first worked at the Odyssey in 1979, in The Chicago Conspiracy Trial, and have done multiple productions there, as both an actor and production staff in a variety of capacities over the years. But it’s been since the ’90s that I last worked at OTE (in Kenneth Robins’s play Black Box, directed by David Schweizer, with Eric Szmanda (CSI) and the late Jeanie Hackett). That said, I recently found out that my fantastic cast-mate playing Caitlyn (John’s daughter), Jacqueline Misaye (she played Portia in Julius Caesar and Puck in Midsummer for Independent Shakespeare in Griffith Park this summer and was brilliant in both roles), attended the Conservatory at South Coast Rep, as did I. Albeit separated by about 100 years.

You studied theatre at University of California Irvine, going directly into the professional company of South Coast Repertory for three years. Is there one lesson or piece of advice from your SCR stint that you try to apply today?

Sure: “Don’t bump into the set.”

Do you find acting with fellow members of a theatre group (i.e. SCR, Antaeus) more comforting (like a warm blanket) than working with all new actors?

Sometimes. It’s great when there’s a kind of shorthand and common vocabulary, but it’s always great and exciting to work with “new” (to me) people — I always learn so much!

How would you describe the advances in the Los Angeles theatre community from that of the early 1980’s to present day?

So many changes over the years, so many theatres, and truly great artists, have gone, and new artists and groups emerge. We were dealt such a tremendous blow by the new rules imposed by a certain New York-based organization a few years ago that I feared that maybe L.A. theatre had been mortally wounded. But, while “from the ashes” is a little overdramatic, there has emerged a scene that is striving to be much more inclusive, more diverse, more representative of the greater culture, and it's very exciting. And certainly has a long way to go. But it's super vital, to hear so many new voices and perspectives, and I think it holds the real possibility to create a great (or even-greater) theatre culture in Los Angeles. At a time when major institutions are struggling to find a sustainable model as patron and “subscriber” economies have so radically changed in the past several years.

As a young acting student, which medium did you envision yourself working steadily in (television, film, theatre)?

I never even thought work in film or “TV” as we used to call it in the olden days was a possibility. I was in my early 20s when Nomi Mitty, a slightly older actress I'd worked with at SCR asked me who my “agent” was? “Agent”? Never occurred to me that such a thing was something I'd have in my life.

If in a perfect world where financial compensation was not a factor, amongst television, film and stage; which would be your preferred medium to act in?

All of them, plus radio/audio-plays, every day of the week (except Mondays).

What do you remember of your first time on a Broadway stage in Donald Margulies' Brooklyn Boy in 2004?

I called my teacher of many years, James Wilson, and thanked him. It had probably been 20 years since I'd studied with him on a regular basis (although we'd stayed in touch over the years).

Is there one stage role you would love to sink your acting chops in?

No. There are one hundred.

What's in the near future for Arye Gross?

Doing a run of Birds of North America at the Odyssey Theatre in West L.A. And I've got a dental appointment in October.

Thank you again, Arye! I look forward to meeting your birdwatchers John and Caitlyn.

