



Heartfelt Theater and Music

By Sarah A. Spitz

THEATER

Wikipedia describes “binoculars” (or field glasses) as two refracting telescopes mounted side-by-side and aligned to point in the same direction, allowing the viewer to use both eyes when viewing distant objects.

In the play, *Birds of North America*, onstage at the Odyssey Theatre, a father and his daughter come together to birdwatch and fill out Dad’s “life list” (of birds) in his wooded Baltimore backyard. But they might as well be looking through the wrong end of the binoculars, as they grow more distant and talk past one another emotionally. It’s partly reflective of our polarized times that their world views separate them, making their personal relationship even harder to reconcile.

The staging is simple but effective: A tall tree trunk is the backdrop, branches hang over the stage and lots of fallen leaves, with the characters’ clothing defining the changing seasons over a ten-year period. The sound design is replete with birdsong and the music is hauntingly beautiful.

The tension between the characters is instantaneous. John, played in masterfully curmudgeonly style by Arye Gross, is married to a doctor who’s supported the family during his 25 years of clinical trials in his quest to create a new anti-malarial drug. Daughter Caitlyn (Jacqueline Misaye) is young enough not yet to have found her own direction. For now, she’s writing a speculative fiction novel in her spare time and working as a copy editor for an ultra-conservative website.

John detests the politics of Caitlyn’s employer. He’s a scientist but also a guilt-tripping environmentalist; of course, as an avid birder, he sees first-hand how human-made climate change is destroying nature. Caitlyn, whose employer is all-in on oil, says she’s just doing a job. John sees it as helping the enemy.

As the seasons pass, they continue birding and quibbling, but the intensity of their differences grows, especially as Caitlyn, now married, experiences the most serious of several miscarriages. She’s becoming more brittle, the marriage is falling apart, and she’s come home to live for a while. John tries to make a scientific

argument minimizing miscarriages, completely missing Caitlyn’s heartbreak.

Later, Caitlyn conveys her mother’s desire to take a trip to Italy with John, but he pooh-poohs the idea, using the carbon impact of air travel as part of his excuse. She just wants John to have some fun but he seems incapable.

The most heartbreaking moment comes later, after Caitlyn finds a career path in marketing and they haven’t seen each other for a long time. John leaves an emotionally vulnerable voicemail, expressing all the things he’s never told her. Will he or won’t he delete it?

The play cycles poignantly through the ultimate seasons of life, enhanced by the genuine onstage dynamic between the two actors. I asked my friend, the father of a college-age daughter, what he thought of the play; we agreed it was powerfully moving but he noticed something I didn’t. “They never once say I love you.”

“Birds of North America” is onstage at the Odyssey Theatre in West Los Angeles through November 19. dysseytheatre.com



PHOTOS BY JENNY GRAHAM

The play cycles poignantly through the ultimate seasons of life, enhanced by the genuine onstage dynamic between the two actors, Arye Gross as John and Jacqueline Misaye as his daughter, Caitlyn.

MUSIC

Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (LACO) launched its 2023-24 season Chamber Series at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts on September 30, and I was blown away by both the music curation and virtuosic performances by the featured artists.

As an English major at UCLA, I’d read the poet/writer Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” But I’d never heard of the composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor or his daughter Avril. British-Sierra Leonean composer/conductor Coleridge-Taylor was referred to as the “African Mahler.” Pianist/composer Avril made history as the first woman to conduct the Royal Marines Band, the London Symphony Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Their stories are worth seeking out.

Avril’s “Idylle for Flute and Pianoforte” featured the astounding piano work of Anne-Marie McDermott, followed by Coleridge-Taylor’s “Clarinet Quintet in F-sharp minor.” Both compositions were dazzling and embraced the program’s theme, “Lineage,” weaving classical and folk elements in each.

Anne-Marie McDermott also reigned supreme in the program’s final work, Ernest Chausson’s “Concerto for Violin, Piano and String Quartet,” which received a well-deserved standing ovation. Margaret Batjer, LACO’s Concertmaster, did a masterful job as the lead violinist.

A tragic story, Ernest Chausson was a disciple of Belgian-born César Franke. He became a lawyer to honor his parents’ wishes, but went on to compose and perform, even though he was tortured by doubt and insecurity. He was a contemporary of painter Odilon Redon and a student of Jules Massenet. He fell into the zeitgeist of “fin-de-siecle” Paris; sadly, he died in a bicycle accident at the age of 40, just as he was beginning to receive recognition.

I highly recommend attending one of LACO’s upcoming programs, featuring compelling musical stories, celebrated works and world-renowned soloists. Find out more at Laco.org.

Sarah A. Spitz is an award-winning public radio producer, retired from KCRW, where she also produced arts stories for NPR. She writes features and reviews for print and online publications.