

# Interview: Director Halena Kays FEELS Amazing Collaboration With This ANGER

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by Gil Kaan

## Circle X Theatre Company starts off their new season with the west coast premiere of Mara Nelson-Greenberg's Do You Feel Anger? opening January 21st at Atwater Village

Circle X Theatre Company starts off their new season with the west coast premiere of Mara Nelson-Greenberg's *Do You Feel Anger?* opening January 21, 2023 at Atwater Village Theatre. Halena Kays directs the cast of Tasha Ames, Charlotte Gulezian, Rich Liccardo, Paula Rebelo, Casey Smith and Napoleon Tavale, with cameos from Bob Clendenin, William Salyers, Jan Munroe, John Getz, Tony Amendola and Silas Weir Mitchell. Halena, a Chicago-transplant, managed to spare some time between rehearsals to answer a few of my queries.

**Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Halena!**

Thank you for your interest in the play.

**What cosmic forces led you to see the original production of *Do You Feel Anger?* at Actor's Theatre of Louisville in 2018?**

I know it is so lucky that I got to see this production at Actor's Theatre in their Humana Festival of New Plays. It was one of the more remarkable experiences I've ever had in the theater. I was surprised! Shocked! I laughed! I felt punched in the gut, it was so exciting. I could not stop talking about this play after I left the theater. I think this is a good example of why new play festivals are so important in American theater and that we should have opportunities to see more new plays, because festivals like this allow directors like me to experience what's new, what people are working on and develop relationships with young playwrights.

**Have you made yourself familiar with Mara's other plays since?**

I have. Mara is an amazing writer and crafter of comedy. I've also had the opportunity to chat with her or ask her questions and collaborate on this production. I have enjoyed getting to know her and her work over this period of time. I feel so lucky to get to work with such a talented person and such a generous collaborator.

**How did you become involved with this current Circle X' *Do You feel Anger?***

Our artistic director Jen kays forwarded me the script. We're familiar with each other's work and she thought I might like it. I immediately responded, I think probably with all caps, saying I know



this play, I've been dying to direct it. After that we continued to collaborate to try and figure out a way and a schedule that would make it possible for me to come to L.A. from Chicago and work with this amazing script.

**What would your three-line pitch for Do You Feel Anger? be?**

I'm from Chicago so I think I don't know what a three-line pitch is. But I will say this play will surprise you. It will make you laugh out loud. It will make you see the world in a new way.

**Have you worked with any of this production's cast or creatives before?**

I haven't. It's one of the things that is most exciting about working on this production is that I've gotten to meet L.A. actors and designers and create a new community of brilliant artists that I hope to work with again in the future. I am blown away by the talent, generosity and hard work that this artistic community has offered



**Six actors make cameos during the Circle X's six-week run. Is this a different approach to the character of 130-year-old man from the original Actor's Theatre' production? Or was this device incorporated during its second (Vineyard Theatre 2019) or third run (A Red Orchid Theatre 2020)?**

I don't think this has been done before but I have not researched it. We didn't get the idea from any other production. This was a brilliant notion that I first heard about from the artistic director of Circle X Jen, and I thought it was a great way to invite more of the amazing L.A. character actors who may not be able to commit to a full rehearsal process and run but would love to continue to collaborate a live performance while pursuing their television and film careers. So this was just such a brilliant idea, it keeps the main cast on their toes. It brings new and exciting voices into the room each week and it allows for playfulness and randomness to be a part of the live performing experience which is important to me and my work across the board.

**What aspects of a production do you look for in deciding whether to contribute your creative talents to?**

This is a great question. It's always different and it's different math for different projects. However, I'll say that this project fulfilled all of my criteria: an amazing script, an opportunity to work with a theater company I admire, and a work environment that is collaborative supportive and joyful.

**You're directed in various regional theatres, mostly in Chicago. How would you differentiate the theatre scenes in Chicago, Los Angeles and Nashville?**

Each city has its own live performance identity. I can't pretend to be an expert on Nashville or Los Angeles entire community as I am generally a visitor to it, but I will say that Chicago is unique in that live theater performance is an end unto itself. Most of the performers and designers are there not to try to use it as a stepping stone to other acting opportunities, but as an opportunity in and of itself which always feels quite lucky. However, I came to Los Angeles with a particular idea that this would be different but I found these actors who choose to do live theater and performance are equally committed to this as an opportunity to share storytelling with the community directly and

have a passion and prioritize this work which has been inspiring and eye opening. The sheer wealth of talent and ingenuity in Los Angeles is inspiring and I've learned new things that I hope to bring back to my theater community in Chicago after this process is over.

**What theatre that you haven't directed in would you love to direct a production?**

There's less a title that I've always wanted to direct although there are many of those. It has always been more about the people I want to collaborate with rather than the playwright, performer or a designer. I love to make work with people that inspire me.



**You are an assistant professor of MFA acting and directing at Northwestern and a member of the Society of**

**Directors and Choreographers. What did you initially want to be growing up?**

The first career I was interested in was to be a flying trapeze artist in the circus. Later I decided that I wanted to be a philosopher. And so when I went to undergraduate, I studied both philosophy and theater. I feel so lucky and grateful that I get to make my living working collaboratively with artists to share stories, themes, ideas and visual art with communities across the country.

**If financial compensation were not a factor, what singular career path would you pursue - Actor? Director? Teacher? Choreographer?**

This is such a good question! I think the thing that draws me to this field of work is that I don't have to do just one thing in a given year. If financial compensation were not a factor, I would act in one production or film or television or something like that. I would direct one new play that I helped to conceive and devise with writer, performers and one play that is finished that I love. Then I would teach three classes a year that I got to choose the topics of. So I guess I'm already living my dream life although some years especially during lockdown I don't quite get my wish.

**What's in the near future for Halena Kays?**

This production ends four directing gigs in a row so I'm looking forward to a break! This spring I get to mentor three new productions at Northwestern University and teach a new play directing and collaboration course that I'm really looking forward to. I'm also planning to reconnect with some of my collaborators at the Neo-Futurist Theater of Chicago where we will be continuing creating some new work. You can keep your eye out in future seasons.

**Thank you again, Halena! I look forward to seeing how You Feel Anger.**

So excited to have you! Please feel free to reach out if have any other questions. Thank you!

For tickets to the live performances of Do You feel Anger? through February 25, 2023; click on the button below: