

“A Doll’s House, Part 2” star lives, works in Long Beach

By Gary Metzker

Contributor

It only took 143 years, but the sequel has finally been written. And it is going to be performed in Long Beach.

“A Doll’s House, Part 2,” the continuation of Henrik Ibsen’s 1879 play, “A Doll’s House,” is being presented by the International City Theatre at the Long Beach Performing Arts Center beginning with an opening night performance April 15 and continuing through May 1.

In the final scene of Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House,” Nora Helmer decides to leave her husband and children to begin a life on her own. In Part 2, Nora — to be played by Long Beach’s Jennifer Shelton — walks back into the house.

“This play was controversial in its day,” says Shelton, who is originally from Oakland but received her bachelor’s degree in philosophy from Long Beach State. “Nora valued her sense of self over her worth as a mother and wife. She deserved to put herself first. It was a feminist idea.”

“A Doll’s House, Part 2,” written by Lucas Hnath, takes place 15 years later. Shelton says Nora is surprised that everyone wants to take shots at her and deal with the repercussions of her actions.

“It will provoke strong thoughts and emotions,” she says. “Even today, some questions haven’t been settled. I’m excited to see the response. I adore the play. She is sure she is right, but personally I don’t know if she’s right or wrong.”

“The setup is there’s a woman who left her family 15 years ago; that’s kind of the only information you need,” Hnath explains in a press release. “All of the things that were debated and negotiated

in ‘A Doll’s House’ are still topics that are debated and negotiated now. So, one of the first ideas that I had about ‘A Doll’s House, Part 2’ is it’s a play about how much we’ve grown, and how much we haven’t, in terms of thinking about equality between men and women.”

Shelton’s father was a judge; her mother was a ballet dancer who not only owned a theater company in Oakland, but also taught dance at a community college. Her parents took her to see plays in New York and London.

“I was always around the arts,” she says.

When it came time for college, Shelton gravitated to music, but she didn’t do theater, at least at the beginning, even though she says she knew every musical by heart.

“I was shy and not all that confident,” she says. “I didn’t think there was a place for me. I played piano, but was told, basically, you aren’t going to be a concert pianist, so maybe you should try to sing.”

Leland Vail, who teaches at the Bob Cole Conservatory at Long Beach State, was an inspiration to Shelton. She learned to sing, people hired her, and she eventually performed on stage in a few university productions.

After graduation, Shelton joined the Broadway company of “Ragtime,” but in 1998, people backing the show filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. The play was able to continue and Shelton then went on tour with the national ensemble.

Shelton is no stranger to ICT. She has appeared in “Let’s Misbehave,” “Master Class,” “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” “Songs for a New

World,” “Five Course Love,” and “The Story.”

“I feel like Long Beach is my hometown,” she says. “It’s a rare treat to do this play here. It’s where I started and where I feel at home. This is my first show back in person since the pandemic. It’s got to be symbolic in some way.”

Shelton says she was touring with cast of “Seven” in Minnesota when the country shut down. She enjoyed the time she spent with her husband and daughter, but then came to the realization that she had no job nor was there the prospect of a job in theater. Fortunately, she has had roles on TV shows and in commercials.

After the play runs its course, Shelton will go back to TV projects.

“I’m falling in love with this character,” she says. “I’m well trained to see all sides of an argument. My background has a lot to do with the appreciation of the subject matter. It’s easy to paint her as a selfish villain, if you think about it, but wait a minute, men put themselves first all the time.”

“I love plays that make you think.”

“A Doll’s House, Part 2” runs at 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays and at 2 p.m. Sundays, April 15 through May 1.

A preview performance takes place on Thursday, April 14, at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$49 on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays (except April 15, opening night, when tickets are \$55 and include a post-show reception), and \$52 at Sunday matinees. Low-priced tickets to previews are \$37.

To purchase tickets and for more information, including up-



JENNIFER SHELTON

to-date Covid-19 safety protocols, call 562-436-4610 or go to www.InternationalCityTheatre.org. The Long Beach Performing Arts Center is located at 330 E. Seaside Way.