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Interview: OTE's Ron Sossi Carves Out Some ELEPHANT SHAVINGS & Lots More

Next up for the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, the world premiere of OTE's Artistic Director Ron Sossi's *Elephant Shavings* opening August 19th

By: Gil Kaan



Next up for the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, the world premiere of OTE's Artistic Director Ron Sossi's *Elephant Shavings* opening August 19, 2023 (with previews beginning August 16th). Ron directs his script with the cast of: Denise Blasor, Diana Cignoni, Jack Geren, Jeff LeBeau, Cameron Meyer and Giovanna Neilan. Ron took some time from his Odyssey multi-tasking to answer a few of my queries.

Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Ron!
Thank you, Gil!

What inspired you to write *Elephant Shavings*?

I've been a theater person for over 50 years, and I've followed various spiritual paths for even more time. As I reach older age, I felt it interesting to try to bring the two worlds together.

What would your three-line pitch for *Elephant Shavings* be?

A Lazy Person's Guide to Enlightenment. A surprisingly funny, strange and compassionate inquiry into the meaning of it all. If we're being dreamed... who is the dreamer?

What has the gestation period of *Elephant Shavings* been?

I started thinking about it over a year ago. Did some brainstorming and got huge numbers of dreams of elements that ought to be included. Of course, even when awake I had a rather large background to draw from.

Has this script been set in stone? Or do you still tweak it?

Set in stone? No, constantly tweaking it. Driving my cast crazy.

Does Ron Sossi the director ever tell Ron Sossi the writer what needs to be changed?

Yes. More and more, Ron Sossi the director tells Ron Sossi the writer what to do, particularly in the areas of cutting and condensing and finding more theatrical means to convey ideas.

You and the Odyssey have been a part of Los Angeles Theatre history for 53 years. Do you have a short list of talent that you can simply call to participate?

Yes, I have a loose but very loyal family of artists to draw upon. Some go back as far as 53 years, and some as recently as this past decade.



When you inaugurated the Odyssey in 1969, what other theatre companies were there in existence?

Hard to remember all of the names of theaters in existence at that time, but I do remember the Company Theatre, Synthaxis, the Burbage, Scorpio Rising, the Megaw, Company of Angels, Mark Taper Forum, Theatre West, Santa Monica Playhouse, South Coast Rep. and, soon afterward, the Matrix and the Back Alley.

What was the original idea behind starting the Odyssey? Providing your own productions to act in?

No, I didn't start the Odyssey in order to find better roles to act in. Though I did a bit of acting, that wasn't my prime interest. I was interested in directing and creating a permanent ensemble of actors devoted to exploratory work. A few years after starting, I found myself very influenced by Polish director Jerzy Grotowski and his ideas, as well as by Joe Chaiken's work with the Open Theater in New York. I was also very much into Brecht in those days. I'm still very much into European theater, particularly Polish, British and German.

You have served as the Artistic Director of the Odyssey Theater Ensemble since the very beginning. How hands-on are you in choosing plays to produce?

Very hands-on.

Do you have the final say for a production to proceed?

And, yes, I have final say for a production to proceed.

You write, direct and produce. What did you want to be growing up?

As a kid, I wanted to be everything from a priest to a magician to a photographer and nuclear scientist. In college, though a theater major, I was interested in film directing and came out to Hollywood to go to graduate school at UCLA. I had a six-year stint in the industry in various capacities, but they got me no closer to directing. In frustration, and as compensation, I began the Odyssey. Shortly thereafter, I became more intrigued with the possibilities of live theater rather than film.

If you had to choose only one of these three professions, which one would it be and why?

I would choose directing. It's an overall creative challenge, but not the more solitary life of a writer. I love acting, but I'm just too bloody old for it.

Besides Bird of North America opening in September and the visiting production of A Sight Ache in August, what else is on the plate for the Odyssey?

Still choosing the season. *The Goat* by Albee is a possibility, as well as *Escaped Alone* by Caryl Churchill. Another Brecht, or a Greek tragedy. Also looking at some original pieces. A return of our experimental Theatre in the Dark (Dark Three) would be great fun too.



Diana Cignoni & Denise Blasor
Photo by Severine Larue

What is in the near future for Ron Sossi?

The future personally? A greater and greater concentration on the so-called "spiritual quest" (always sounds corny to me, but I'm very serious about it). Continuing the Odyssey with a more part-time approach, trusting to my 45-years running partner, Beth Hogan. And more time spent with my girlfriend Severine. A few more years of living would be nice too.

Thank you again, Ron! I look forward to checking out your Elephant Shavings.