

— A Double Play at — The LATC

Two Shows, 'Home' and 'Canyon,' Deal with People Learning About, or Trying to Express, Who They Are

By Nicholas Slayton

Two West Coast families wind up in a tense confrontation on what should be a relaxing holiday. Across the country in New York City, the young daughter of Chinese immigrants tries to escape her parents' world and be her own person. All of the central characters struggle with how they perceive themselves and each other, and confront their own biases.

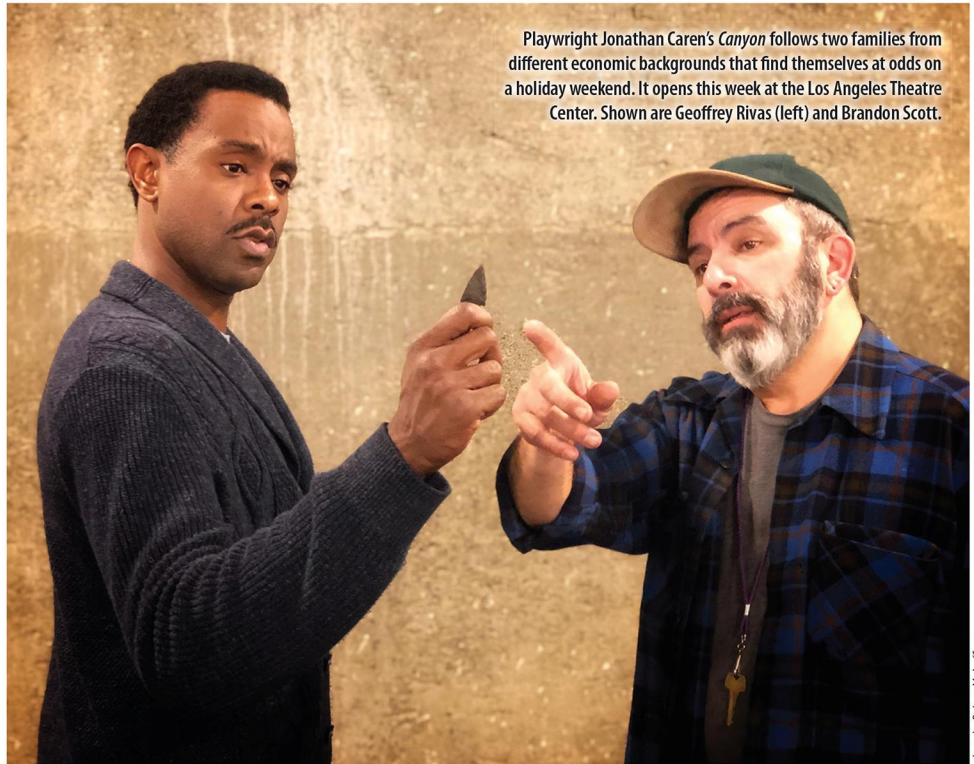
Those issues are at the heart of a pair of plays opening this week at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in the Historic Core. *Canyon*, from playwright Jonathan Caren, opens Thursday, Feb. 28, and Nancy Ma's *Home* bows on Saturday, March 2. Both close on March 24.

The shows cover similar themes, but in a kind of reverse style, according to the playwrights. *Home*, which was presented at the 2017 Los Angeles Women's Theatre Festival, is writer and performer Nancy Ma's autobi-

Also at the LATC is *Home*, Nancy Ma's autobiographical one-act. She plays 15 characters in the one-woman show.



photo by Martha Benedict



Playwright Jonathan Caren's *Canyon* follows two families from different economic backgrounds that find themselves at odds on a holiday weekend. It opens this week at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. Shown are Geoffrey Rivas (left) and Brandon Scott.

photo by Robert Marafie

ographical one-woman play. *Canyon*, a world premiere, is a fictional tale inspired by real events.

Canyon follows a pair of upper-class newlyweds who cross paths with a Latino father and son on Labor Day weekend in 2016. They meet in a backyard deep in a canyon. The situation is tense from the outset, due to the father's stress and efforts to keep working to provide for his family. When an accident occurs, the families find themselves at odds, both unsure of what to do or how to back down.

Caren started working on the play before the 2016 presidential election brought Donald Trump to office. Although he said the ideas *Canyon* explores — including the United States' paradoxical love of cheap labor and paranoia over immigration — have been topical subjects for years, he opted to set the play two months before the election in the effort to show in part how the country ended up in its current divided state.

"It's also benefitted from having a long gestation period," Caren said. "Working with Latino artists and the Latino Theater Company, it became much more human and complex."

The father, Eduardo, who is played by Geoffrey Rivas, is a humble man going through tough times. Rivas (who is also a member of the Latino Theater Company, which is producing the show along with the IAMA Theatre Company), said Eduardo works seven days a week as a laborer, but that he often finds himself ignored or at risk of being cast aside. Rivas, who helped develop the one-act show, which is directed by Whitney White, said he was drawn to *Canyon* by the message and ambiguity of the script.

"We did a workshop of it two years ago, and there were public discussions afterward," he said. "I realized Jonathan was on to something, because it created such a spectrum of ideas in the discussions. It touches on so many hot-button issues."

The set is designed to be immersive, and the production designers seek to make the entire theater feel like the backyard where the play takes place, Caren said. That means the actors sometimes move out among the audience members.

"It's not kitchen theater," he said, "but it is based in this groundedness of how we actually communicate with each other."

15 Characters, One Actor

Ma based *Home* on her own childhood and early adult experience of having to serve as a kind of guide and interpreter for her parents, who emigrated to the United States from China. She veers from helping her parents to striking out on her own, leaving New York City's Chinatown to explore the United States.

The show is expansive, but Ma tackles it all. She plays 15 characters in the one-act work, including family members and friends.

"A lot of it is done through accents or characteristic gestures. Like, one family member, he always has a cigarette in his hand," Ma said. "Also, my family speaks this dialect of Chinese, so a third of the show is in [Taishanese]."

She said that even though most audience members don't speak the language, they will be able to follow along, based on her responses in English, as well as the emotions and cadence expressed by the characters.

The set for *Home* is minimal, with Ma onstage accompanied only by three chairs. At some points she moves off stage and provides wider narration to frame the proceedings.

Rivas, who is also directing *Home*, said the show features some fourth-wall breaking.

"In a way it's more like a presentation, when she's interacting with the audience, then jumping back into a scene," he said. "We're creating the environment around her with light and sound. The rest is just her acting carrying it."

Rivas sees parallels between the plays. Both deal with identity, but *Canyon* is more about people who know who they are, while *Home* follows a woman seeking to define who she is.

"The way Jonathan has written *Canyon*, the audience members are going to have to decide who you side with, who you show empathy with," Rivas said. "With Nancy, it's her story, with a couple vignettes. You could plug in a different ethnicity and it would ring true."

Ma echoed that take, saying *Home* is a personal story, but she hopes that it will resonate with audiences of all backgrounds.

Canyon runs Thursday, Feb. 28-March 24; *Home* runs Saturday, March 2-24, at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St. or thelac.org.

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