

THEATRE

‘Marilyn, Mom, & Me’: a love letter to Marilyn Monroe, Eileen Heckart and life-defining relationships



Courtesy of Luke Yankee

Eileen Heckart (left) and Luke Yankee (right). Their mother-son relationship serves as the basis of “Marilyn, Mom, & Me.”

Samantha Diaz

Managing Editor

Long Beach resident and playwright Luke Yankee lives his creative life by one central philosophy: The more personal you make something, the more universal it becomes.

It’s this belief that has persisted through his most vulnerable work yet: a play about his relationship with his mother, and her relationship with an unlikely best friend, Marilyn Monroe.

“Marilyn, Mom, & Me” is slated for its world premiere at the International City Theatre on Feb. 16, with whispers of Broadway possibilities already permeating across the

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STARRING CAST:



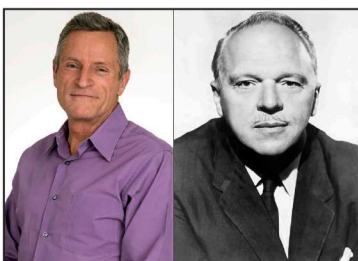
Alicia Soper (left) stars as Marilyn Monroe (right).

Courtesy of Luke Yankee



Brian Rohan (left) stars as playwright/director Luke Yankee (right).

Courtesy of Luke Yankee



Noah Wagner (left) plays "Bus Stop" director Joshua Logan (right).

Courtesy of Luke Yankee



Jacquelin Lorraine Schofield (left) plays Rosetta LeNoire (right) as well as Ella Fitzgerald.

Courtesy of Luke Yankee



Laura Gardner (left) stars as Eileen Heckart (right).

Courtesy of Luke Yankee

coasts. The production has received accolades such as the 2020 Rising Artists Sponsor's Choice Award, "Best Play" in the 2021 Writer's Digest Play Competition and the 2022 Stanley Award for Drama (previous recipients include Terrence McNally's "This Side of the Door" and Jonathan Larson's "RENT").

The play reveals a widely unknown side of Marilyn Monroe, a genuine friendship between two powerful and talented women, and how that friendship shaped Yankee throughout his life.

Yankee's mother, Eileen Heckart, whom he describes as a "tough customer," a loving mother and a harsh critic, is known to most as the no-nonsense Broadway actress and a Theater Hall of Fame recipient. Following a rewarding career earning both Academy Awards and Golden Globes, Heckart could happily recall her journey with riveting stories for party guests. That is, however, until someone would ask about Marilyn.

POPCORN TRIVIA

**Eileen Heckart
Heckart has a star
on the Hollywood
Walk of Fame at 6162
Hollywood Blvd.**

Heckart would become "tight-lipped," Yankee recalled, and if pushed on the subject of her time with Marilyn, would burst into tears.

"I had never seen anyone else affect her that way in her life," Yankee said, adding that the public display of such strong emotions was uncommon for his mother.

Five years after Heckart died

from lung cancer in 2001, Yankee wrote a novel about his life growing up with a famous actress as a mother titled "Just Outside the Spotlight." The book explores their relationship, but looking back, Yankee acknowledges he omitted certain details.

"I wouldn't say it sugarcoats it, but there are certain elements I chose to skate over about her toughness, about her being a pretty hard drinker," Yankee said. "In the play, while it's by no means an expose, and by no means a 'mommy dearest,' I show our relationship warts and all."



Eileen Heckart and Marilyn Monroe on the set of "Bus Stop."

Courtesy of Luke Yankee

Heckart and Monroe met on set of the production for the 1956 film "Bus Stop." Both women were incredibly popular in the industry, with Monroe at the height of her fame. Monroe had just come off a year of studying at the Actor's Studio in New York, and decided she wanted to dive into method acting.

Since the two were cast as best friends, Monroe was determined to make that true, at least for the time of filming. Although it made Heckart uncomfortable at first, Yankee said the two wound up "bonding over their wounds," both being or-

phans from a young age and "for all they achieved, never really felt like they deserved a place at the table."

Heckart's mother was married five times beginning in 1919 (an uncommon occurrence at the time), and if one of the husbands didn't want a child around, Heckart would be shipped off to live with her grandparents. She could return if the next husband had a softer disposition toward children, only to be sent away again.

"By writing the play, I was able to realize the other side of that and able to see where she was really coming from, and the good intentions behind the toughness, which as a kid isn't always easy to see," Yankee said.

In 2019, Yankee began going through every book he could find on Monroe and interviewing people who could help him piece together the lesser-known aspects of his mother and Marilyn's lives. He holed himself up in his Palm Springs home, and in the heat of the summer, wrote "Marilyn, Mom, & Me."

The play is told from the perspective of a 40-year-old Yankee interviewing his mother about her friendship with Monroe, shifting timelines from 1956 to 2000, a year before Heckart died. He said the process helped him arrive at some "basic truths" of his relationship with his mother.

"I started out to write a play about my mother and Marilyn, and I wound up writing a play about my mother and myself," Yankee said. "Through writing this play, I unearthed a lot of things about our relationship and in a way, I found myself forgiving my mother for some of the shortcomings and some of the things that I might have liked to have been different as her son."

The play delves into the persona of Monroe, Heckart and Yankee with equal strengths, while disproving some assumptions made



Eileen Heckart and Marilyn Monroe in the dressing room during "Bus Stop."

Courtesy of Luke Yankee

about Monroe over the years. The production tells unknown stories about how Monroe dealt with studio executives and acting coaches, but more importantly, dispels the notion that Monroe was a victim, or became famous due to her romantic relationships.

Monroe was one of the first female actors who created their own production studio to produce their motion pictures, "Bus Stop" being the first film produced by her own company, Marilyn Monroe Productions. "Marilyn, Mom, & Me" portrays Monroe as "a very smart and brilliant businesswoman," Yankee said, and her relationship with a woman who was her equal.

Making a production about Monroe is a daunting task. One can look at the myriad of tried and failed attempts in recent years, portraying flat, and sometimes frankly, uncomfortable depictions of the famous actress. Yankee said these failed attempts have not discour-

aged him from making his play.

"I don't have any hesitation in that regard, because I do treat Marilyn with great respect," Yankee said. "Ultimately, it's my love letter to both women in a way."

The production is also a love letter to Long Beach, in another way. Yankee was once the creative director at the since-shut down Civic Light Opera, which closed due to financial issues. When Yankee joined the team, he said, "the writing was already on the wall," but he left the role having made his name in the West Coast theater scene and meeting his now-husband of 28 years.

"Marilyn, Mom, & Me" will be Yankee's fourth show at the International City Theatre. Yankee chose artistic director Caryn Desai to lead the production team.

Tickets for "Marilyn, Mom, & Me" are on sale on the International City Theatre's website, and will play on select nights from Feb. 12 through March 3.