

# Interview: Alessandra Assaf's Right On Time with Her TWELVE O'CLOCK TALES WITH AVA GARDNER

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by Gil Kaan

Alessandra Assaf has taken her life-long admiration for Ava Gardner and fashioned a love letter to her in her one-woman show *Twelve O'Clock Tales with Ava Gardner* opening at the Whitefire Theatre January 15, 2023. This tale of the silver screen icon is directed by Michael A. Shepperd.

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

Honestly, the thrill is mine!

**What was the very first movie you saw with Ava Gardner?**

SHOWBOAT! I was about five. And captivated. I'm sure I was quite annoying - all the questions I asked... but even then, on some primal level, I understood Ava's portrayal of Julie's anguish. I believe it was Dickens who said something to the effect of children so finely perceiving and feeling injustice... I mean already at five, how many times had I watched my older brothers go off to do something wonderful that didn't include me? Ava was sublime in the role!



**What is it about her that has kept its fascination with you to write about Ava Gardner and portray her?**

Hmmm... this is a tricky one to answer. I never set out to write a story about Ava Gardner. I was exploring some themes in a writing group that had to do with "physical magnificence" - not a coupling of words I came up with - but rather, an idea, a topic out there in the zeitgeist - that I somehow tapped into. Those explorations invited Ava in.

Beauty was celebrated in my family and Ava set the bar. You simply didn't use the word "beautiful" or "gorgeous" unless you were speaking of Ava Gardner. There were other, more apropos words to describe women who hadn't been kissed by Mother Nature as magnificently as she had. Pretty, charming, adorable, cute, appealing, attractive, lovely, fetching, elegant, stunning, even handsome... when it came to eye candy, you had to be specific!

And I hadn't wanted to play her initially. I was going to play her maid, Carmen Vargas, and tell *about* Ava. My husband fell on the floor in protest. When I told him I didn't have it in me to play the most beautiful woman in the world, he balked - as a good husband should! The real Carmen was knee high to a duck, giving me several inches on her. The husband convinced me.

**Was *Here's to Life* you wrote with Rachel Maya an earlier incarnation of *Twelve O'Clock*?**

Indeed, it was! My initial musings led me to writing a cabaret show - giving Ava, in this incarnation of her life - the opportunity to sing. Ava Gardner never dreamed of being an actress, but she had a passion for music and would have loved to have become a singer. Growing up poor, such things weren't available to her. I like to quip that my amazing partner and dear friend, Rachel, was born with a genetic advantage. She's Cuban and Jewish giving her rhythm and wit in spades. Her pithy, incisive edits were a wonderful marriage, adding vibrance to the patter of my cabaret. It didn't hurt either that Rachel is an elegant painter, very visual, and so divinely feminine!

## When did you start writing with Michael Lorre?

April of '21. My original production Here's to Life was shuttered by COVID in March of 2020. But by April of '21, there were vaccines, and I got itchy to live again, get out there and do something... that and an invitation to perform my show in Sacramento that summer. Through a mutual friend, I reached out to a director I'd admired.

There was so much Michael Lorre loved about my cabaret show, but he wasn't interested in directing a cabaret. He felt the material was too good to be spent on so light a medium. With some tweaks and transitions, he said, he thought my work could be turned into a profound play - more than just another solo show, but rather a play with one actor. Something lasting. YES!



I loved his vision. Clever, acerbic, a masterful storyteller, watching him work, I suspected Lorre had a divining rod between his ears. He created the tension Here's to Life needed to make it a play - giving it an emotional arc, as opposed to just tell a story, sing a song; tell a story, sing a song... But damn! This required that I'd really have to return to my origins as an actor. No more would I be merely breaking the fourth wall, telling glib, insouciant tales and singing well-loved standards. I'd really have to *act*. Heaven help me!

He believed in me more than I did myself. But I loved his vision for the script, and for me as a performer. I was seduced! Michael Lorre, that dazzling s.o.b.!

Sadly, that Sacramento production was also shuttered due to COVID. This time, some variant. Delta or Omicron, or maybe it was some other daunting mystery. Perhaps Ava herself? This year marks what would have been her Centennial Birthday. Maybe she's guided me all along to save it for right now! (It is, in fact, her birthday, *today December 24th!* as I answer your questions!)

## How long has it taken from the embryo of the idea of Twelve O'Clock in your mind to this world premiere?

Hard for me to believe it, but FOUR years! I started going to a free Saturday morning writing group led by a young powerhouse of a woman, Jessica Lynn Johnson. And from her guided meditations, out came these musings... I knew that these folk got up and told stories, but I thought it was more like The Moth. I had no intention of making a show, but I fell in love with the Soaring Solo community and got mission creep. I experienced such bravery from them; it was inspiring. And then when I started taking the baby steps of actually crafting something, I received so much support and encouragement! Wow!

## Are you covering a specific time frame of Ava Gardner's life?

Yes. It is 1974 and Ava's back in Hollywood shooting the film Earthquake! Like many in their 50s, she finds herself at a crossroad.

## What cosmic forces brought you together with Michael A. Shepperd for this project?

Cosmic forces indeed! I pinch myself daily. Perhaps it was Reenie who sent him. "*That poor girl's gonna need some help!*" (That's a line from the play... how Ava met Reenie). And what could be more cosmic than to have a chap named Shepperd shepherd this vision to the stage. Such largesse! So magnanimous and joyful he is. I wanna ask him if we can have a blood transfusion - just put your arm next to mine - and give me some of that, what you got! He's remarkable, uber-talented, a mensch - an embarrassment of riches, really - as an actor and director and a person. He brings insight and sagacity to the material I didn't even know was

there! He's playful and brave and loves women... *femininity*...  
Goodness, sometimes I think he's teaching me how to be a real girl.  
Maybe that is what this is all about - Ava, and this entire journey -  
teaching me about authenticity.

**How did you luck upon getting Whitefire for your venue?**

It just seems most fitting, as all of this was conceived there! It's where  
Jessica Lynn Johnson's writing group gathered. But WhiteFire Artistic  
Director Bryan Rasmussen was just so supportive. I go weak in the  
knees for enthusiasm, and his was genuine, abundant and generous!

**If you were to submit Ava Gardner for a modern dating site,  
what qualities of hers would you list?**

It would probably read something likethis -  
Looking for a good time?  
Seduction comes witty and fully-clothed; the well-timed word, the  
perfectly timed touch...

*"Love looks not with the eye, but with the mind..."*

You want the clothes to come off? Remember, a good safe-cracker listens.  
Put your blinders on, bastards, then you are in for a real joy ride!

**What character flaws would you definitely omit?**

Hoo! She had a temper!! That lady knew how to misbehave!

**Any similarities do you see between Ava Gardner and yourself?**

Oh jiminy! Listing any similarities, I fear stumbling into bragging about myself!  
Were I half the woman she was, I'd be happy. Wish I had her courage.  
Though as I say this, I hear her telling me, "It wasn't courage, honey, it took balls!"  
Ok. In earnest: We are both Southern. Love dogs (in her case, Corgis)... Share the same politics, though  
while I may be thought a kook for mine, she was slut-shamed for hers. Dubious of religion, but we both  
understand the special gift that is fried chicken... cherish friendship and despise disloyalty... music and  
booze, cuddles and laughter... suckers for affection in word, deed, and touch.

**What would you like the Whitefire Theatre audiences to leave with after your curtain call?**

A good time! A hell-uv-an-Ava good time!  
No. But yes, good times aside - beauty is ephemeral; true love is lasting, is sure - true love encourages  
sovereignty over oneself; not ownership or domination. Ava was Venus, the love goddess of her time, but the  
love she so desperately craved always eluded her. The "physical magnificence" we hunger will leave you  
starving.

**Thank you again, Alessandra! I look forward to meeting your Ava Gardner.**

Oh, but I thank *you!*

