

The Kennedys Take Comedies to the Next Level – by STEVE JULIAN

April 11, 2012



Beth and Danielle Kennedy

A self-described senior citizen, Danielle Kennedy sits under a mane of curly red hair, as her daughter Beth, taller, with wavy shoulder length brown hair, sits across the round table.

Danielle asks her daughter whether Roosevelt has passed gas. “Yes, he did, once,” Beth says. “He’s become such a diva.”

Roosevelt, or Roo, is a pug who belongs to actor Rob Nagle. Both the man and dog appear with Beth Kennedy in Troubadour Theater Company’s production of *Two Gentlemen of Chicago* at the Falcon Theatre.

“Roo’s never peed or pooped,” Beth adds.

Beth Kennedy, Roosevelt the Pug and Matthew Morgan in "Two Gentlemen of Chicago"

“At least on stage. People are saying that we’re bringing it to the next level having a dog up there with us – a dog with a pulse. I

Beth Kennedy, Roosevelt the Pug and Matthew Morgan in "Two Gentlemen of Chicago"



said to him, look, I realize you got great reviews, and it says you steal every scene, but you’ve got to stop improvising and do what we rehearsed.”

Fat chance.

Mother and daughter laugh it off. Just another theater tale – one of who knows how many that have crossed their lips.

While her daughter gets upstaged by a pug, Danielle is settling into rehearsing *Ivanov*, her first full-length Chekhov production and an Odyssey Theatre and Evidence Room co-production. She first met director Bart DeLorenzo when he was co-directing Justin Tanner’s *Voice Lessons*. It was a social meeting that led to his casting her in Tanner’s *Day Drinkers*, a show extended twice last year at the Odyssey.

“One of the things that I discovered working with Bart during *Day Drinkers* is that, because he is so nonjudgmental, he gives you an opportunity to try your stuff. He created more freedom inside of me as an actor because he just allows things to happen. He’s not worried about you. He’s not thinking, oh my God, she doesn’t get it. He just has faith in his actors. I have to say he’s for me personally the most affirming director I’ve ever had.”

Danielle Kennedy and Tom Fitzpatrick in the 2011 Odyssey Theatre production of "Day Drinkers"; Photo by Ed Krieger



And collaborative, a word DeLorenzo has used to describe himself. “That’s what he is,”

Danielle says. “Watching him work this Chekhov thing with all of its levels – sound and lighting and some little treats at the end – is amazing. Plus he’s got all these interpretations of Chekhov that he’s read. He’s just bringing so much to it. I’m learning a lot.”

For DeLorenzo, Kennedy was an easy choice. He says via email, “Danielle is a natural Chekhovian actress – truthful, funny, and passionate. I kind of think Justin [Tanner] is LA’s Chekhov, so it just sort of follows.”

When *Ivanov* is put to bed, Danielle Kennedy returns to appear in another Tanner play, still being written and tentatively scheduled for this summer, *All-Night Barbecue*.

“I came back to California from 10 years in New York in 2005,” says the elder Kennedy. “I met Justin because of my little daughter sitting over there. Beth introduced me to Mara Casey who was casting then and Mara introduced me to (actress) Maile Flanagan who introduced me to Justin Tanner. So I haven’t known Justin as long as all the *Avenue 43* [Tanner’s web series] people who were in *Day Drinkers*, but he keeps writing characters with me in mind.”

And not only her, she admits, but also for some of the other actors who recently appeared in *Day Drinkers*, such as Jon Palmer and Flanagan, who calls Danielle Kennedy ‘inspiring’.” Tom Fitzpatrick, a member of the *Day Drinkers* cast from Kennedy’s own generation, again joins Kennedy in *Ivanov*.

“It’s great that [Tanner] includes us senior citizens in his writing,” Danielle says. She and Tanner “really hit it off” when they met. “He’s almost like a son to me. I’m just crazy about him. I think he’s a genius. He’s just ‘right there’. There’s no phoniness about him. He tells it like it is. I don’t think there’s any bullshit between us at all. I feel very free around him. If I don’t want to talk for 10 hours, I don’t have to. If I’m in a great mood, I feel he celebrates that. There’s a real unconditionality there.”



Danielle Kennedy and Tom Fitzpatrick in "Ivanov"

She admits to loving her outspoken, heavy-drinking character Val in *Day Drinkers*. “And in *All-Night Barbecue* I am a retired artistic director and my husband is dying and I couldn’t care less because I’ve got other fish to fry. I just want him to take a vitamin and get on with his life. I don’t want to hear all his complaints. It’s so much fun.”

Kennedy also has appeared in Tanner’s *Oklahomo!* and *Procreation*, which was directed by David Schweizer at the *Odyssey* in 2010. “I was like an Octomom in her 60s in *Procreation*. All of the characters Justin writes for me are all maniacs in some way, shape or form. Catholic school girl goes awry – that’s what happened to me when I met Justin Tanner. I’m not playing any more nuns.”

She is a fiery actress, but off stage, far more quiet. "I'm not a raging alcoholic as my



Beth and Danielle Kennedy

characters tend to be, although now in my older years I do enjoy a vodka tonic now and then. But I think in every role we play there are certainly parts of us in them. I guess if I wanted to really fertilize the selfish, outspoken kind of a loud, obnoxious me, I could do it, but I'm pretty private normally."

The characters Tanner creates, she notes, always have to have people around them. "They're very social characters. It's great fun to do but then it's great fun to go home and hang out in my room."

Or watch her daughter in a Troubie production.

"I think Beth and (Troubadour Theater Company artistic director Matt Walker) have a partnership similar to what I have with Justin, but I don't want to speak for her."

Beth leans in. "Oh yeah,

Matt Walker, Christine Lakin, Monica Schneider and Rob Nagle in "Two Gentlemen of Chicago"



definitely. We're like partners in crime. He refers to me often as his foil. He completely gets me. He'll throw me a very left-field character and he knows I'll turn it into something that he probably didn't even imagine...He knows I'm not afraid to look stupid or ugly for the laugh."

In fact, she'll embrace it. "Completely. I hide behind it. I smother myself in it. I bathe in it. It's my expression."

Beth Kennedy met Walker in 1993 when they played boyfriend and girlfriend in *Meet the Wilsons* at the Victory Theatre. She joined the Troubies in 1998. In an email, Walker called Kennedy "a voice of reason and a calming influence on the company, and there's no one more safe to be on stage with...Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett and Madelyn Kahn all rolled into one. I love her, her work is consistently brilliant, and without her, the Troubadour Theater Company would be selling pencils at the airport."

Danielle Kennedy, who once supported her family as a real estate agent ("I haven't sold a house since 1981") and a motivational speaker, a gig she let pass about six years ago, leans on the occasional TV role for financial support. "I've been pretty fortunate with *Parks and Rec*, *Criminal Minds*, *CSI*, *Grey's Anatomy*, that kind of stuff. But there's nothing like theater. If someone told me I could never do theater again, I'm not so sure I'd hang in there. It reminds me of when I was three and my cousin and I would put up sheets in the house and do puppet shows."

And now that her children are grown she says, "I can finally be a starving actor. I live on Social Security. I have a great agent and a great manager and I'm a very hopeful person. I'm half-Irish,

half-Italian, so I'm going to embrace whatever I'm into at the moment. I'm very passionate. I don't have any regrets."

Nor does her daughter who, along with her husband, is foster-parenting a 17-year-old girl, their second foster child in the past two years. Beth happily admits to sharing some of Danielle's traits.

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, I suppose. Passion, drive, motivation, energy, talent, quirkiness, humor. Sarcasm I think I get from my dad more - my mom's a little more goofy. And she's fearless."

Her mother cuts her off. "I've got to jump in here. *She's* fearless."

Christian Leffler, Danielle Kennedy, Tom Fitzpatrick and John-David Keller in "Ivanov"



“No,” says Beth, “you’re fearless.”

“No,” Danielle interjects. “My goal before I die is to be as fearless as her. She inspires me.”

“Okay, now I’ll start crying. Crying!” adds Beth.

The matriarch takes over. “In my world, every generation should improve on the talents or gifts of the previous generation. My mother and my grandmother were incredibly talented people who didn’t have the opportunities Beth and I have to take it to the next level. My mother had to suppress her own abilities and my grandmother was beaten down by my grandfather. She had a wonderful operatic voice and would sing at weddings and my grandfather would get so angry, he’d tell her to keep her mouth closed, stand in the corner, and make ravioli.

“I feel like they gave us something and we have an obligation to work it out because they didn’t get the chance.”



Beth Kennedy and Danielle Kennedy

Danielle Kennedy appears in Chekhov’s *Ivanov*, produced by Odyssey Theatre Ensemble and Evidence Room. Opens April 14. Plays Wed May 9, 16, 23; Thur April 19, 26, May 3 and 31, Fridays except May 11, Saturdays, 8 pm; Sun 2 pm (except Sunday, April 15 at 5 pm and April 29 at 7 pm). Through June 3. The Odyssey Theatre 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles. www.odysseytheatre.com. 310-477-2055 ext. 2.

*****All *Ivanov* production photos by Ron Sossi**

Beth Kennedy appears in Troubadour Theater Company’s *Two Gentlemen of Chicago*. Plays Sat April 14 at 8 pm; Sun April 15 at 4 pm; Fri, April 20 at 8 pm; Sat. April 21 8 pm and Sun. April 22 at 4 pm. Closes April 22. Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Dr., Burbank. www.falcontheatre.com. 818-955-8101.

*****All *Two Gentlemen of Chicago* production photos by Chelsea Sutton**

*****All photos of Beth and Danielle Kennedy by Eddy Will**