

# Rob Nagle on Second Round of Play Dates

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Rob Nagle, a favorite local actor, has one dream for LA theater. “I’d like to see every actor in LA become as involved in it as I’ve tried to be, and as much as a lot of people I know try to be.”

Nagle could never be accused of being a wallflower. His theatrical credits range from the Denver Center Theatre Company, LA Theatre Works tours, The Road Theatre Company, South Coast Repertory, Connecticut Repertory, all the way to the Mark Taper Forum. Nagle’s move to Los Angeles as well as his own far-reaching involvement in the arts scene are two major factors that contribute to his consistent work.

“[In LA] I was really able to not just grow into my age but go back and forth between these different genres of theater and television and commercials and film with some regularity, so I could learn the trade in all those different capacities. Keeping yourself out there, saying yes as much as you possibly can.

“It’s easy to go home and nestle and think about the bad parts of your day. It’s harder to go out and support friends in plays and go do rehearsals. But my life’s not long enough to sit at home. I don’t want to do that. I want to be out there trying to pursue it. The only way I can think of to actually get jobs is to get yourself out there.”

Before spending late summer and early fall of 2010 in *39 Steps* at Denver Center Theatre Company, Nagle found himself in *Play Dates*, a Sam Wolfson (*Jewtopia*) comedy from Green Beetle Productions. It’s now returning, after its successful Hollywood run last July.

“It was only going to be four weeks,” Nagle explains, referring to the original run, “then they started to get audiences and word of mouth was getting around. So the idea was to extend, but I was unavailable because of *39 Steps*. So they thought, “‘Oh, we can put a pause on it and bring it back.’ I think it’s really brave of them.”

Nagle knew the director Jennifer Chambers and playwright Wolfson from Northwestern, though not well until they reconnected. “Thank you, Facebook,” Nagle interjects. They all found themselves in LA. Their relationships do affect the rehearsal process, he thinks:

“It’s good to know you’ve got a friend who respects your work, and the feeling is mutual so you don’t have to walk on eggshells. It’s easier to talk more frankly and you have a shorthand, some history. It was like working with Ann [Noble, the actress/playwright] on *Sidhe* [at The Road Theatre Company, early 2010] because that was like just dropping into a scene. It’s amazing when you have that kind of history, when you know each other really well. That’s like family, walking into your living room; it feels very comfortable.”

Preparing the second round of *Play Dates*, Nagle and the team rehearse in a new space and with one new actress, Krystal Marshall. She replaces Kristen Lee Kelly, one of Green Beetle’s co-founders and producers, who stepped down to focus on the production side. As director Chambers recalls, “We were looking for an honest, truthful actress who had great comic timing and who would not be intimidated by stepping into an already established ensemble of very strong actors. When Krystal came in she blew us away with her humor and vulnerability. So much so our playwright yelled after her as she was leaving, “Don’t ever stop acting!” “



Actor Robert Nagle

## FREEDOM OF REVISITING

Although the success of the first *Play Dates* run created the buzz needed for its return, the team isn't resting on its laurels. After working on a full production last year, they are again rehearsing on a bare stage. Nagle sees a certain freedom in revisiting the piece.

"One of our goals has been to reinvent it, not to do the same show we did because there's no reason to do the same show. We want to do where we are now "" six months later "" as performers because it's now us in 2011 doing it. Which involves rewrites, which involves Sam coming in and thinking, ""OK, we can make that stronger' and so it's like a long-term workshop. This process has been a lot easier but in a lot of ways a lot harder, because you're trying to wipe everything you've done before out of your mind."

*Play Dates* is essentially three short acts with thematic connections. In the first act, Nagle plays a boy in kindergarten trying to navigate a bumpy relationship with a Girl Scout. When he plays Dr. Love in the second act, rehearsing a direct address speech to his studio audience, that's when the process of re-creating *Play Dates* feels a little like stepping backwards because of a lack of a live audience. Director Jennifer Chambers agrees:

"Directing *Play Dates* again has been an incredible experience as well as challenging. The dance between what we did before and trying not to recycle that, but also not let go of the great discoveries we made. It is hard to get used to the entire world of the play, set, lights, sound, audience and then to strip that away. Ultimately, I think the time back in rehearsal is elevating the show to a new place."

At least one part of the show is easier this time — finding the thin mints. In the first part of *Play Dates*, Stacy (played by Elizabeth Bond) wants to be a Girl Scout and needs to sell a lot of Girl Scout cookies to be considered. *Play Dates* premiered in July, which is off-season for the Girl Scout cookie drive, so the producers "had to find them on EBay, had to get a case of them," Nagle says.

"We were very careful because we knew there was a limited amount in stock. We had to be really careful not to eat them and save them for the show. And we were all really good about it, but it took every bit of willpower not to just devour and devour boxes of those."

Nagle's resume, posted with links on his website, reads like a syllabus of theater history mixed with some of LA's greatest new voices. On his home page, a dizzying and challenging roster of readings seems like enough work to keep one actor busy, never mind rehearsals for a full production and some film and TV work. Nagle's last reading was a workshop of Stephen Schwartz's new musical *Snapshots*, with a book by David Stern and Ken Sawyer directing. Quick to clarify that he is not a singer, Nagle tells the story of how he was cast in this workshop. "Ken "" bless his heart "" saw me in *Sidhe* and thought, ""Rob's actually a good idea to play the guy.' So he asked, ""Do you sing?' And I said, ""I'm an actor who sings, Ken, just so you know.' So I'm in there with five really good singers. And I'm kind of out of my element and so uncomfortable with it but I'm enjoying it and I'm loving the experience."



Elizabeth Bond and Rob Nagle All production photography by Ed Krieger



Krystal Marshall and Brian Monahan in *Playdate*

## THE IMPORTANCE OF A WEBSITE

His website (<http://www.robnaple.com/>) appeared online before websites became as common as resumes. He felt he was dragging his feet on launching one until working with Jeff Marlow (another Northwestern graduate) on *Where's Poppa?* at the Falcon Theatre.

"I'm very stubborn about things and I realized if I'm not doing everything I can to get myself out there, they're not going to know who I am. So Jeff told me about the software and how to acquire the name, and then because I'm stubborn I just spent many nights late, up until four in the morning, after a rehearsal or after a show, and just started messing around with it. Realizing this could be a networking tool, I'd link through to people.

"Google and other search engines monitor the legitimacy of sites through their traffic and the links to [outside] legitimate sites. So now when I type my name into Google, my website's the first thing that comes up, which is a really hard thing to do and I just lucked into it. People thank me for linking to their sites and I can't help but think we're all in this together, let's help each other."

Although both his roles in *Play Dates* deal with love and relationships, growing up, maturing or deflating, Nagle has also earned acclaim for more serious roles, recently in *London's Scars* at the Odyssey and *Sidhe*. He appears comfortable in nearly any genre, as a leading man or playing over 20 characters with 35 costume changes, as he did in *39 Steps*.

With this varied history, does Nagle have a favorite playground for his acting? "Whatever I'm doing now. I think some of the choices "" and thankfully I sometimes have a choice of what the next project is, not always "" but one way of deciding what to do next is to see what you just did. What's the farthest removed?

I just did Shakespeare; what am I going to do next? Sometimes they just come to you. I did two dramatic shows this year and I felt like I needed something a lot lighter. That's certainly what *Play Dates* was. So I suspect there'll be some great serial rapist next. It will be something really dark and sinister next."

He finds the most difficult characters to be people with some sort of mental illness or addiction. His wife Heather Allyn, who choreographed a dream ballet for *Play Dates*, tells Nagle frequently, "You're just too sane. You're too sane to be an actor." Nagle expounds on the point, "Same reason I'm not angry enough to be a stand-up comic. Whenever I have to kind of really expose some raw nerves with either mental illness or drug addiction or alcoholism, they're so far from my experience in many ways; it takes a bit more invention and imagination to figure out where those characters live."



Krystal Marshall and Brian Monahan



Rob Nagel



Rob Nagel and Elizabeth Bond

At the same time, Nagle enjoys the challenges of those characters, recalling when he played a mentally challenged man on TV and realized that the experience had been his time to explore *Of Mice and Men*. Rabbinical roles, however, are not how he would cast himself. “I played a few, and the Jewish side of my wife’s family just laughs. They really laughed when they heard I’d auditioned for the role of Schlomi in Donald Margulies’ *God of Vengeance, the Yiddish Drama*, years and years ago in New York. They dined out for 10 years on that one,” he recalls with a wry smile.

Then there are times he plays characters that actually existed in real life. While on tour with LA Theatre Works’ *The Great Tennessee Monkey Trials*, based on transcripts, Nagle recalls, “One of the more goose-pimpling experiences was meeting the descendants of the person you’re playing onstage. It was certainly a humbling experience. It’s one that makes you feel like a storyteller.”

**Play Dates, produced by Kristen Lee Kelly for Green Beetle Productions, opens Jan. 29; plays Thur.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 7 pm; special performance Mon., Feb. 14 at 8 pm; through March 6. Tickets: \$25. Theatre Asylum, 6320 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood; 323,960.7784 or plays411.com/playdates. More info: [www.playdatestheshow.com/Welcome.html](http://www.playdatestheshow.com/Welcome.html)**

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