

Catholic Girl's Guide

RE OPENS P I C O P L A Y H O U S E

By Tom Provenzano

Photo: Chris Kane

ANNIE HENDY GRADUATED with a theatre degree from University of Cincinnati and was excited about her future as a stage actor. A move to New York sparked her career; then, she decided to try Los Angeles where she ran into lots of closed doors. She sighs, "I was shell-shocked because I wasn't getting anywhere. I had a difficult time trying to find my way."

Some soul-searching during this trying period revealed emotional memories that began to take theatrical shape in her mind. She recalls, "I had all

these stories under my belt about my life and wanted to make them into a play. I just started writing and I couldn't stop." Many of the memories revolved around her Catholic upbringing and how she was dealing with faith in her adulthood. These serious topics evolved into highly comic stories. Ultimately a play formed about a young woman falling away from her religion and jumping into sexuality. *The Catholic Girl's Guide to Losing Your Virginity* opened two years ago at the Hudson Guild in Hollywood and immediately took off. It then moved to the Tony

Award-winning Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park where it played to sold-out houses.

In the two-actor comedy Hendy's character is based on her experiences while Cyrus Andrews plays 19 different roles. She says, "It is very much an actor's show with lots of physical comedy. The male actor symbolizes 'Everyman' though he does play one woman, a nun."

She is proud of the play as it was presented, but knew it could be made deeper. Then at a neighborhood barbeque she and a stranger got involved in a marathon conversation about theatre. He turned out to be Eli Gonda, a rising theatre maven who was in rehearsals for the Broadway bound *Cyrano de Bergerac* for which he was Associate Director to the prolific Tony Award winning director David Leveaux. She and Gonda hit it off so well he came on board to help her develop then direct the play for its new run at the Pico Playhouse.

For more than four decades the Century City Playhouse was a fixture in LA's theatre community. For an amazing five year run it hosted Joe Mantegna's *Bleacher Bums*. Ultimately, it seemed it would succumb to the financial pressures that have closed so many small

theatres. Then the space had a reprieve. It is now refurbished and reopened as The Pico Playhouse. It has two spaces, a fully equipped 99-seat house and a large black box style room for rehearsals, performances and special events.

Producers Ryan Scott Warren and Will Willoughby have assembled an award-winning creative team for *Catholic Girl's* that includes scenic design by Tom Buderwitz (2007 Ovation Award for *Paradise Lost*), lighting design by Michael Gilliam (2007 Ovation Award for *Gershwin Alone*)

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and costume design by Maggie Morgan (2006 LADCC nominee for *Bach at Leipzig*).

Gonda has been mentored by such directors as Jack O'Brien and Leveaux, both of whom he has been associated with on several theatre projects. Currently he is working with Danny Jacobson, producer of TV's *Roseanne*, on a new theatre piece.

So why would he give so much time to a play in an intimate theatre? He doesn't hesitate in his answer, "I loved the idea of doing a new piece outside of New York in a city I find incredibly supportive of young writers. It felt like the obvious choice. It was a magical experience working with Annie. The play has such heart, honesty and humor.

"It is about a girl who changes after her priest is busted for soliciting a prostitute. Upon the realization he has a better sex life than she does she decides to go out and lose her virginity."

Hendy says, "The great thing about Eli is his passion. We have that in common. We've done a lot of rewriting. The play is so much more layered than it was. Eli knows what makes a good story. He sees the big picture where I just get caught up in the moment. He is brilliant in that sense."

Her dream is for the play to follow the course of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. "I had been miserable in LA but I knew I wasn't finished here. So I thought, 'What do I have to do before I leave?' I didn't know what the play was but I had this voice in my head begging me to write. One day in Santa Monica I was praying for a sign from God. As I was crossing the street Nia Vardalos walked by. I got down on my knees and said, 'That's my sign.' Six months later on opening night she was actually in the audience. That's why I keep going forward with the project because I know it is meant to be something bigger than it is." ■



Playwright Annie Hendy and Director Eli Gonda

THE CATHOLIC GIRL'S GUIDE TO LOSING YOUR VIRGINITY

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The Pico Playhouse
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