

All Stars, Onstage and Off

Trivial Comedy for Serious People

BY MEGAN MONAGHAN

When director Chris Fields was asked to describe the group of actors that he and SCR Casting Director Joanne DeNaut have assembled for the World Premiere of *What They Have* by Los Angeles playwright Kate Robin, the phrase that sprang from his lips was, "They're All-Stars."

By this he meant not just that they are all stars of stage and screen — which, by the way, they are! But more than that, the depth of talent and breadth of experience represented by *What They Have*'s creative team and cast would easily make the major leagues anywhere, at any time.

Robin's funny, searing new play will have its world premiere on the Segerstrom Stage as an anchor event in this spring's Pacific Playwrights Festival. Originating from an SCR commission, *What They Have* tells the story of two married couples: Jonas and Connie, and Suzanne and Matt, who live in the swirl of the Los Angeles entertainment industry. Individually and together they confront the meaning of marriage, how to guide one's life spiritually or psychologically, fertility and parenthood, and the importance of financial security. They reach for a way, any way, to feel satisfied and content instead of looking at their friends and coveting... *What They Have*.

The play touches brilliantly on the zeitgeist of our moment, when infertility treatments are discussed at dinner parties and bloggers deliver blow-by-blow descriptions of the demands of early parenting. Robin's characters are challenged by the relentless cultural drive towards a "better" life or lifestyle, often represented by material luxury and the comfort of possessions, but even stretching as far as presenting children as the ultimate accessories. Matt, Suzanne, Connie and Jonas struggle with the key questions every generation has to confront. At some point, everyone reaches a moment of crisis that shatters the worldview that we had lived by up till that point. We discover the need for a new spiritual order and a fresh set of life coping skills to address the curve ball that fate has thrown, whether that is a personal loss, a professional catastrophe, or a stark confrontation with the limits our mortal lives force upon us.



Fields describes *What They Have* as "such a Los Angeles play, such a California play, so wildly contemporary. The audience's identification with the world onstage and the people will be enormous and really enjoyable. After seeing the play, I would like people in the audience to look at each other and say 'That's you!'" Robin's skillful unveiling of the uncomfortable sensation of being perceived as successful when one feels like a failure will touch and tickle every one of us. In Fields' view, Robin's genre blender brings us "face to face with the absurdity and the humor of living, as well as the pain. The audience will laugh through what they identify with. This play lets us recognize ourselves in positive and provocative ways."

Actors Matt Letscher and Marin Hinkle are a perfect match as Jonas and Connie — the young turk novelist turned successful TV writer, married to a powerful film producer. Letscher was most recently seen at SCR as the charismatic middle brother Kap Clay in Beth Henley's *Ridiculous Fraud*, first at the 2005 Pacific Playwrights Festival reading and then in the play's West Coast premiere on the Segerstrom Stage in 2006. He also brought his talents to the NewSCRipts reading of Kate Robin's earlier play *Anon*. Letscher's other acting credits include Broadway and regional theatre, film and television work, and last year he added playwriting and directing to his resume by helming the world premiere of his original play *Sea of Fools* at the acclaimed Purple Rose Theatre Company.

Hinkle's stellar list of credentials also embrace Broadway and Off-Broadway productions including *The Tempest*, *Blue Window* and *Slavs!*, plus film, television, and regional theatre from coast to coast. She was featured in the Echo Theater Company's L.A. production of *Anon*. last fall, and at SCR in the 2007 NewSCRipts reading of *Incendiary*. Chris Fields names Hinkle "A force of nature — the kind of major actress who can hold her own with Zoë Wanamaker, as Marin did in *Electra* on Broadway." We are delighted to welcome her back for this production.

Nancy Bell was also featured in the cast of *Anon*. at the Echo, but SCR audiences will readily remember her from the casts of *The Philanderer*, *The Circle* and *All My Sons*. In *What They Have* she portrays Suzanne, a painter whose corporate buyers may keep food on the table, but challenge her to find other food for her soul. Asked to describe Suzanne's paintings, Kate Robin points us towards the pure colors and deeply textured natural forms of artist Isabel Bigelow. Bell's stage work else-



where includes classics such as Moliere's *The Misanthrope* at McCarter Theatre in Princeton, and challenging contemporary plays such as Caryl Churchill's *Owners* at New York Theatre Workshop.

Kevin Rahm makes his SCR debut as Suzanne's husband Matt, a failed indie rock songwriter and band frontman whose efforts in the early 1990s resembled the work of the Pixies, Luna and the Lemonheads. Never able

to build the following that would sustain him economically or artistically, Matt has turned

to teaching music instead of playing it. Rahm's talent was identified early when he was named the winner of the nationally competitive Irene Ryan Acting Scholarship. Frequent TV serial work including recurring roles on "Judging Amy" and "Desperate Housewives" has alternated with stage opportunities for Rahm, from a world premiere at the Kennedy Center to the Pacific Resident Theatre's recent productions of *All My Sons* and *A Question of Mercy*.

This gorgeous cast will be guided by Fields' remarkable depth of experience directing new plays. As the founder of southern

California's Ojai Playwrights Conference and

the Echo Theater Company he has worked with and staged plays by Adam Rapp, Christopher Durang, Ellen McLaughlin, David Lindsay-Abaire, Quincy Long and Sarah Ruhl, among many others.

His recent production of *Anon*. won praise from the critics and confirmed his sensitivity to playwright Robin's multifaceted view of our ever-changing, ever-challenging world. Fields characterizes Robin as "unique among contemporary playwrights in her ability to

identify and bring to life what is so exquisitely difficult about the world today. She absolutely understands how much it hurts and how difficult it is right now, and at the same time lets us see how funny it all is."

The designers working on *What They Have* represent an all-star team of their own. Chris Barreca's scenery will be lit by Lap-Chi Chu, while Alex Jaeger designs costumes and Michael Roth provides the production's original music and designs sound. Megan Monaghan will serve as dramaturg.

Robin notes that with this play, she longs to draw our attention to an element of wisdom that appears somewhere in most cultural traditions around the world, expressed differently every time: In the end, you don't need what you don't have. But, as her character Connie says, "There's always something that could be coming."



Theatre's recent productions of *All My Sons* and *A Question of Mercy*.



HOLLYWOOD