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# Review: In Lucas Hnath's 'Dana H.,' a kidnapping survivor's truth hides in the shadows

By CHARLES MCNULTY  
THEATER CRITIC | JUN 03, 2019





Actress Deirdre O'Connell. lip-syncing to an audio interview of playwright Lucas Hnath's mother, recounts her kidnapping and captivity in "Dana H.," Center Theatre Group's world premiere at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. (Craig Schwartz)

Lucas Hnath, part of a bumper crop of playwrights rethinking the parameters of American drama, has written a play about his mother that is rife with contradictions.

“Dana H.,” which is having its world premiere at the Kirk Douglas Theatre while Hnath’s “Hillary and Clinton” is on Broadway and his wildly successful “A Doll’s House, Part 2” is being produced across the nation, is composed from interviews yet is stranger than most fiction. Hnath uses not only his mother’s actual words but also her recorded voice, yet her character remains elusive.

But the most curious incongruity is the one that makes me want to see this fascinating 75-minute play a second time: It's impossible to sort out fact from falsehood in Dana's story, yet by the end a truth as profound as it is slippery is revealed.

"Dana H." tells a story of trauma, terror and the way victimization continues even after the threat of violence has subsided. It dramatizes the inherent challenge in giving testimony to experiences so overwhelming that they undermine the ability to translate memory into coherent narrative.

The play recounts the months-long ordeal in which Dana, a chaplain working on a psych ward, was abducted and abused by an ex-con named Jim, whom she had been counseling while he was recovering from a brutal suicide attempt. Timelines and geography are fuzzy; details don't add up. One of the unfortunate legacies of trauma is that it turns the victim into an unreliable narrator of her own experience.

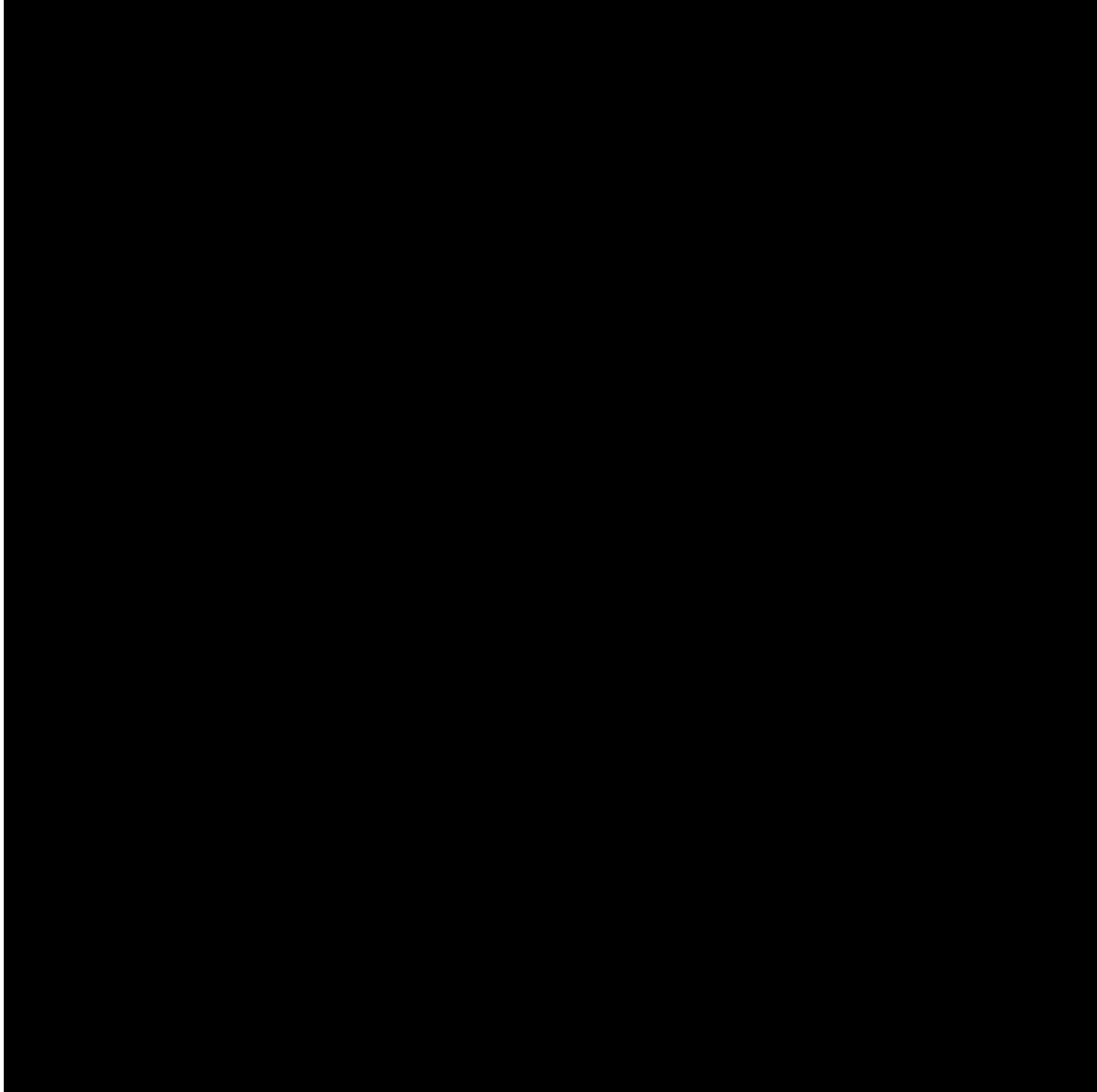
But what might seem like an investigation into what happened to Hnath's mother, a vetting of her tale, turns out to be something more complicated. "Dana H." is a sly referendum on how we process a survivor's story. Our resistance is as much a subject as Dana's wobbly act of remembering.

The production, directed by Les Waters with unflagging concentration, is unorthodox to say the least. Andrew Boyce's scenic design is a fluid cross between an analyst's office and a shabby motel room evoking Florida interstates and dubious drifters.

The play unfolds as a dialogue between Dana and Steve Cosson, the artistic director of the Civilians, who interviewed Hnath's mother. Cosson has a wealth of experience with what his company calls "investigatory theater," and Hnath may have felt that a more objective witness might elicit a fuller version of his mother's testimony.

The title, "Dana H.," has the ring of a Freudian case study, and a delicate mother-son dynamic lurks in the background of a story Dana believes may be too disturbing for Hnath to psychologically handle. His active, artful silence haunts the piece.

For most of the play, Deirdre O'Connell, who plays Dana, is alone onstage. Dressed in red and black, she comes across as an attractive middle-aged woman with a healthy concern for her appearance. The manuscript she clutches and occasionally consults from her chair is her own rendition of the events that she finds so hard to keep straight.



Deirdre O'Connell plays Lucas Hnath's mother, lip-syncing with near-perfect accuracy to a recorded interview of Dana Higginbotham in "Dana H." at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. (Craig Schwartz)

'Dana H.' is a sly referendum on how we process a survivor's story.

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O'Connell is one of the underrecognized great talents in the American theater. An Obie-winning veteran who worked for several seasons at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, she's a playwright's actor if ever there was one, able to make the divergent styles of Sam Shepard, María Irene Fornés, Annie Baker and Lisa Kron seem tailor-made for her lived-in qualities.

I'll admit my heart sank momentarily when I was reminded as I entered the theater that O'Connell would be lip-syncing to an audio track of Hnath's mother's voice. But my fears of a gimmicky performance were instantly dispelled once the play began.

The track provides both Cosson's questions and Dana's responses, but it's nearly impossible to tell that O'Connell isn't speaking Dana's story. In an uncanny feat of acting, O'Connell makes not only every word but every hesitation, stammer and punctuating laugh her own. Her gestures when she's not speaking seem to be the only gestures possible in the moment. Sound designer Mikhail Fiksel and illusion and lip sync consultant Steve Cuiffo contribute to the production's seamlessness.

Hnath, a formalist with a heart, has constructed a theatrical experience that operates on two levels: the raw material of his mother's testimony and the artistic filter that edits, arranges and keeps at a slight intellectual remove what we're hearing.

The jumps in the track are audible as the harrowing story unfolds of how Jim kidnapped Dana. Described as a monstrous figure in prisoner tattoos, this hardened felon convinces Dana that he is part of the underground Aryan Brotherhood, whose power intimidates even law enforcement.

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After bashing her in the face and controlling how and when she receives medical treatment, Jim perversely sets himself up as her protector, the only person who can keep her — and, in a menacing innuendo, her family members — safe. Slowly and systematically, she becomes brainwashed, accepting his vision of the world as her sense of helplessness grows more complete.

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The drama is fueled in part by the question of how Dana eventually escaped her living nightmare. But the conflict that gives “Dana H.” its expansive dimension exists between the audience’s skepticism and Dana’s own unreliability.

Dana sprinkles in remarks about her past — her dabbling in satanism, for instance — that complicate our trust. Her psychologist mother, she tells us, was convinced that Dana was evil from the age of 3 and sanctioned the beatings that scarred her childhood. None of this is elaborated or integrated. Hnath doesn’t want us to resolve our doubts. They are part of his mother’s story.

Frustration builds as Dana fails to take advantage of opportunities to get away from Jim, but the psychology of her situation is difficult to imagine. The tendency to blame the victim as a way of making the world seem less

dangerously anarchic becomes a tempting defense for the audience even though it's painfully evident the way trauma draws further trauma.

Violators detect vulnerability, sensing their violence won't be unfamiliar. The abnormality of the situation keeps other people at bay. Not even the police want to get involved. The gender politics of Dana's victimization isolates her further.

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"Dana H" is divided into three parts: "A Patient Named Jim," "The Next Five Months" and "The Bridge." The story, accelerating in a frenzy that shakes up not only the staging but our hope in definitive answers, leaves us wondering perhaps as much about what Dana didn't reveal as what she did.

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In "The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma," psychiatrist Bessel Van Der Kolk defines "soul murder" as the loss of ability to "trust our memories and be able to tell them apart from our imagination." This description of trauma seems painfully applicable to Dana's case, though Hnath offers an alternative perspective in "The Bridge" section.



In talking about her later work with hospice patients, Dana reveals how she helps the dying ease their journey to the other side. Eliciting their visions, she provides them with a comforting story that blurs the distinction between truth and fiction. Or rather she finds in what remains partly incommunicable the correspondence between them.

At the curtain call at Sunday's opening, Dana Higginbotham took a bow alongside O'Connell. Together with Hnath, they have made a profound contribution to the theater of trauma.

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## **'Dana H.'**

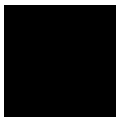
**Where:** Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd, Culver City

**When:** 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 1 and 6:30 p.m. Sundays; ends June 23 (call for exceptions)

**Tickets:** \$25-\$79 (subject to change)

**Information:** (213) 628-2772 or [centertheatregroup.org](http://centertheatregroup.org)

**Running time:** 1 hour, 15 minutes (no intermission)



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Charles McNulty



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Charles McNulty is the theater critic of the Los Angeles Times. He received his doctorate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism from the Yale School of Drama. McNulty has taught at Yale, the New School, New York University, the City University of New York Graduate Center, UCLA and the California Institute of the Arts. McNulty, who got his theatrical start as a literary intern at the New York Public Theater in the days of Joseph Papp, is a former Village Voice theater critic and editor. He was the chairman of the Pulitzer drama jury in 2010. He received the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism for the theater year 2009-10 and was awarded the top prize for feature writing from the Society for Features Journalism in 2011.

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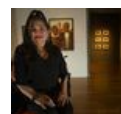
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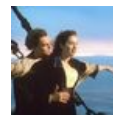
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