

# 'Dana H.': Theater Review

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12:00 PM PDT 6/3/2019 by Jordan Riefe



Craig Schwartz/Center Theatre Group  
Deirdre O'Connell in 'Dana H.'

A captivating captive odyssey. [TWITTER](#)  
6/23/2019

## **The latest world premiere from 'A Doll's House, Part 2' and 'Hillary and Clinton' playwright Lucas Hnath is a gripping one-woman drama about his own mother's real-life ordeal, starring Deirdre O'Connell.**

When playwright Lucas Hnath entered New York University in 1997, his evangelical mother in Orlando, Florida, became a hospital chaplain who occasionally worked on the psychiatric ward. There she befriended a neo-Nazi who, in an act of reinvention, sought her advice on joining the clergy. On a call home one day, the playwright, who was raised by his mother alone under difficult circumstances, detected an evasive quality in her voice, as if something was wrong. During a visit months later, she broke down in tears and told him of a harrowing five-month ordeal that became the basis for *Dana H.* That gripping monologue stars Deirdre O'Connell as Hnath's mother and is now receiving its world premiere at the Kirk Douglas Theatre before moving to Chicago's Goodman Theatre on Sept. 6.

As O'Connell takes a seat centerstage in scenic designer Andrew Boyce's dim pastel motel room, she is accompanied by a technician who connects her ear plugs and microphone. Above the proscenium, a chyron explains that she will be lip-syncing to an edited interview conducted with the playwright's mother by his colleague Steve Cosson of the documentary theater company the Civilians.

The solo play begins and ends in death, though the only thing that perishes is a part of Dana H. She explains that, as a hospital chaplain, she has frequently been present at the moment of death, describing one family who insisted the deceased was only sleeping and tried to awaken her with prayer.

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## **['Hillary and Clinton': Theater Review](#)**

Listening to Dana, it's clear where her son got his storytelling talent as she describes Jim, a member of the Aryan Brotherhood, by the rough quality of his handmade prison tattoos, a detail that deftly paints the picture in a single stroke. Released from the hospital psych ward on Christmas Eve, Jim has nowhere to go and winds up staying through the holidays with Dana and her husband, Rick.

Weeks later, after Dana and Rick separate, Jim, always needy, is having a hard time living on his own. Dana becomes his security blanket, by force. He abducts her, breaking her nose and smashing her lip in the process, taking her on the road with him while he carries out illegal activities for the Aryan Brotherhood at various points between North Carolina and Florida.

More terrifying than Jim is a society that turns a blind eye to him, even though the evidence of his depravity is right before them in the form of battered Dana. When she tries to escape into the hands of the police, she finds they know Jim and greet him like an old friend. Soon thereafter, he purchases a shotgun with no problem, telling the clerk, "I can't buy it, I'm a felon. But she's gonna buy it."

"Nothing worked," says Dana, a woman severely punished for a generous act of mercy. "Nothing was the way it was supposed to be." She concludes that Jim must have been an informant to be so chummy with the police, ignoring the question of how many of them might be fellow neo-Nazis. She muses about the beatings she took from her parents as a child and wonders if it didn't help her endure her ordeal, even contemplating whether Jim is the incarnation of her own spiritual condition.

Eventually rescued, Dana is a transformed person, homeless and without work. She finds strength in a construction job, hauling steel during the day and sleeping in her car at night. A bridge to the afterlife is how she describes herself, explaining that pain obstructs death, that dying is a conscious act, and the dying can be coaxed back to life.

O'Connell (*The Affair*) delivers an uncanny performance, mouthing the prerecorded words of Dana so convincingly they appear to be her own. More stirring is her ability to live the story she is telling, tentatively revisiting the fraught episode, pausing, sighing, embodying the emotion in Dana's voice as she wills herself to relive her transformative nightmare.

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## ['A Doll's House, Part 2': Theater Review](#)

With a body of work often defined by Socratic dialogue, Hnath seems most at home when he's hurling souls against one another, as in his 2017 Broadway debut, [A Doll's House, Part 2](#) (nominated for eight Tonys, with a win for lead actress Laurie Metcalf), and [Hillary and Clinton](#), which is currently playing on Broadway starring John Lithgow and Metcalf, who was again nominated.

His process has been described as deliberately overwriting, then trimming the material to the vital parts, similar to a documentary filmmaker in the editing room. For *Dana H.*, he first worked from a transcript, then reworked it based on the audio and the rhythms of his mother's delivery. His talents are on display not in the crafting so much as the shaping of the piece, bracketing the play with talk of the metamorphic nature of death and the afterlife, inserting well-timed pauses to govern pacing while building to dramatic and emotional climaxes.

Les Waters directed Hnath's breakout 2014 play, [The Christians](#), about the conflicts within an evangelical megachurch, and more recently, *The Thin Place*, which premiered at Louisville, Kentucky's Humana Festival of New American Plays earlier this year and will move to off-Broadway's Playwrights Horizon in the fall. With *Dana H.*, Waters blurs the lines between documentary and drama in a manner similar to filmmaker Werner Herzog, who claims not to distinguish between the two.

Although Hnath's mother often suggested he write a play about her ordeal, for years he resisted and it's easy to see why. If mishandled, *Dana H.* could have become a cheap exploitation of her tragedy. Thankfully, Hnath moves beyond the sensational aspects of the story to comment on society's indifference to at-risk women, corrupt policing, racism and PTSD, as well as issues of mortality, empathy and change. On opening night, the real-life Dana Higginbotham joined O'Connell onstage and thanked the audience. She didn't look like a victim as she took a bow. Instead, she looked like a survivor.

*Venue: Kirk Douglas Theater, Culver City*

*Cast: Deirdre O'Connell*

*Director: Les Waters*

*Playwright: Lucas Hnath, adapted from interviews with Dana Higginbotham conducted by Steve Cosson*

*Set designer: Andrew Boyce*

*Costume designer: Janice Pytel*

*Lighting designer: Paul Toben*

*Sound designer: Mikhail Fiksel*

*Executive producers: The Civilians, Goodman Theatre*

*Presented by Center Theatre Group, Goodman Theatre*

- Jordan Riefe

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## 'The Secret Life of Bees': Theater Review

6:00 PM PDT 6/13/2019 by David Rooney



Ahron R. Foster

LaChanze (left) and Elizabeth Teeter in 'The Secret Life of Bees'

Sisterhood is powerful. [TWITTER](#)

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