

Tennessee Williams' *Milk Train* Stops at the Fountain

By Tom Provenzano Photo: Chris Kane



Simon Levy and Karen Kondazian

TENNESSEE TIME IN LOS ANGELES means witnessing Williams diva Karen Kondazian working with director Simon Levy. It's not just local theatre mavens who have come to know the working duet of these two artists, the Williams estate (well known for its persnickety attitude when it comes to granting performance rights) is so impressed with the Kondazian-Levy partnership at the Fountain Theatre the executors are willing to make concessions to the rigorous requirements. The case in point is *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, the story of Mrs. Goforth, a dying, wealthy widow, and the beautiful young man who enters her life.

This rarely produced work failed twice on Broadway in the early '60s, though boasting legendary leading ladies, first Hermione Baddeley, then Tallulah Bankhead. Later a disastrous motion picture starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton lived up to its title, *Boom!* The last production locally was over 25 years ago at the Megaw Theatre in Northridge with Magda Harout and Paul Latchaw, directed by Elaine Moe.

By all accounts *Milk Train* does not stand among the greatest of Williams but the artists are nevertheless intrigued. Levy relishes the chance to work on the lesser known plays. He explains, "I love the challenge of what I call the B+ Tennessee Williams. I want to show the world how wonderful these plays really are if they are done right. Also, the role of Mrs. Goforth is a perfect fit for Karen. We were looking for a project to do together again.

"The play has the traditional Williams characters: incredibly strong female and masculine but sensitive young man. This particular one was written at the time when Tennessee

had just lost his partner of many years, Frank Merlo. He was obviously deeply involved emotionally in the issue of death and the preciousness of life. Mrs. Goforth in many ways represents that spirit of wanting to survive. I think it is one of his more incredible works, parts are equal to the best of his plays."

For Kondazian, one of the great treasures of her life was knowing Tennessee Williams. She owns a pair of his glasses which always rests on her dressing room table when she's playing one of his strong but vulnerable women.

Just as important as that direct connection with the playwright is her long-time theatrical relationship with Levy. Their first association was with Williams' *Orpheus Descending* (for which she received an Ovation nomination), then his *Night of the Iguana* and later Terrence McNally's *Master Class* (and another Ovation nod).

"Between us there is so much unspoken. Simon is the most brilliant director. He and I are like one when we work. We don't even have to speak. He gives me a glance and I know. It's like lovers. We are professional lovers," Kondazian laughs.

"That doesn't mean we don't fight—boy do we! But we also respect each other. I wouldn't do this play without him. I'll try anything he says because I trust him. We go out on stage and walk the tightrope without a net. In rehearsal, Simon is my net. We have the same taste and are passionate about Williams and we understand him."

She continues, "Tennessee told me actors can't just act his work but have to totally understand the dichotomy he lived with emotionally and spiritually. He said, 'If you don't understand that as a human being, then you have to act my work. If you understand it you can play my work.'"

Kondazian is obsessive about research. When she and Levy did *Master Class* she spent months reading everything she could about Maria Callas. She didn't have as much lead time for *Milk Train*; nevertheless, she is devouring every bit of information she can about the work. She describes her process, "I have to know the playwright's intention, the genesis of why he wrote it."

What does she consider a successful rehearsal? She smiles, "The same as in performance where suddenly you just start channeling. It means we get into that realm of being totally in the moment. You're so strongly in the moment the audience is given the gift of being in the moment with you. That's why people love theatre. They are always waiting for that magic moment that illuminates the dark within us. When you succeed, you feel a gasp from the house because they see themselves."

The intense partnership between Kondazian and Levy continues to impress the Williams estate. So much so he has been granted the rights to adapt the writer's novella *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* for the stage. This is a coup many have sought but Levy ultimately landed. The project, still in its infancy, undoubtedly will become another milestone in this Williams-driven theatrical marriage. ■

THE MILK TRAIN DOESN'T STOP HERE ANYMORE

Opens Sept. 28;
plays Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm;
Sun., 2 pm; through Nov. 4
Tickets: \$25-\$28
Previews: Sept. 13-27 (\$15)
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