



SECTIONS



ADVERTISEMENT

THE THEATER LOOP

ENTERTAINMENT

'Maiden' is the reason Sandra Oh left 'Grey's Anatomy'

By **BY CHRIS JONES**
TRIBUNE CRITIC | JUN 19, 2014



FEEDBACK



FEEDBACK

(Phil Velasquez, Chicago Tribune)

With its sadly timeless themes of political tyranny, the fragility of democracy and the intersection of political and personal abuse, Ariel Dorfman's drama "Death and the Maiden" certainly feels ripe for revival. The widely acclaimed work by the Argentine-Chilean scribe was a global hit in the early 1990s, premiering at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1991, and then showing up on Broadway with Glenn Close and Richard Dreyfus. Roman Polanski made a movie version in 1994 with Sigourney Weaver and Ben Kingsley.

In New York, if you were to attempt such a revival on Broadway today, you'd surely need a star in the central role of Paulina, long a favorite of top-tier actors and a character whose past includes torture and whose present, she fears, might well include her torturer. You'd need a name like, oh, Sandra Oh, the Canadian actress who, for a decade, has played Cristina Yang on the ABC drama "Grey's Anatomy."

ADVERTISEMENT

Advertisement



FEEDBACK

In Chicago, though, that necessity would not apply. Although it happens from time to time, big stars don't generally show up at the city's nonprofit houses, which are not known for making performers rich or even offering the publicity that accompanies a nice, limited run on Broadway.

Nonetheless, Oh opens in Chay Yew's production of "Death and the Maiden" Friday night at the Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago, having just quit "Grey's Anatomy." That was no small event in TV land. Last month, a headline on The Huffington Post read "Why Cristina Yang Leaving Grey's Anatomy Is So Devastating."

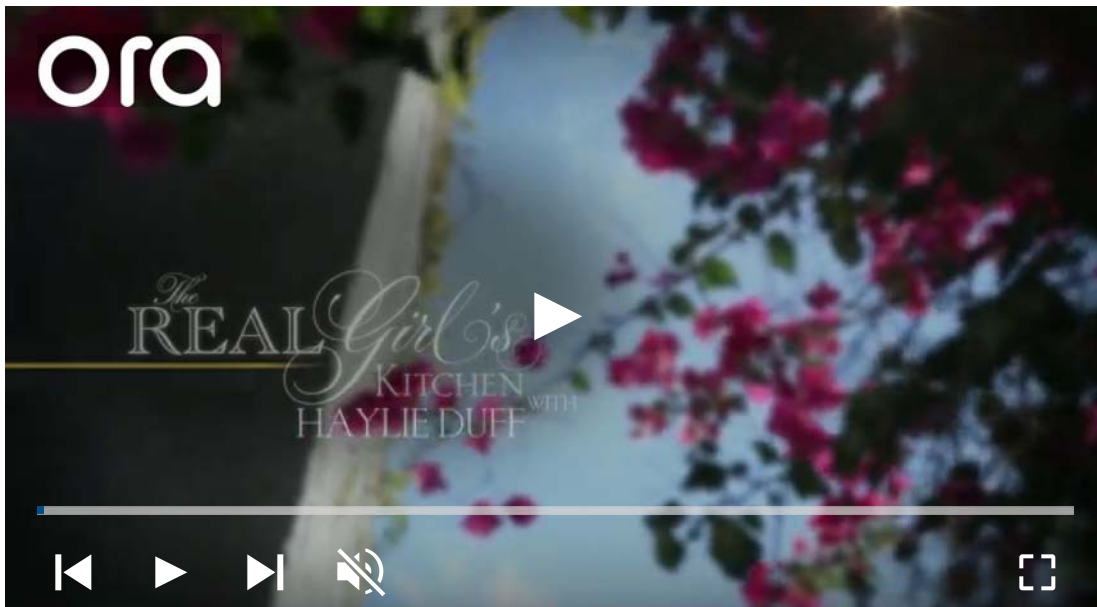
Oh has known Yew, the artistic director of Victory Gardens, since the two met in Los Angeles theater circles. Oh has been itching to get back into the theater. Yew, she says, convinced her that Chicago audiences are the best in the country, that they really listen in the theater, that they won't look away or close their eyes and that they like engaging with dark, serious works like the one she is doing at the Biograph Theatre.

[\[Most read\] Employees at suburban Milwaukee clinic unknowingly gave out 57 shots with deliberately ruined vaccine; pharmacist arrested »](#)

"You really can't do a play between a network schedule," Oh said over a lunch of Korean dumplings in Lincoln Park last week (a lunch she cooked). Oh was, to some degree, holed up, after injuring her foot in rehearsal, although she is continuing in the role as planned.

FEEDBACK

Advertisement



Oh made the decision to leave "Grey's Anatomy" after the 10th season. It was, she said, entirely her decision, despite the medical drama offering "an unbelievable opportunity to explore 10 years of a character."

"Imagine what that's like for an actor," she said. "You don't have to imagine any back story. You don't have to imagine, say, the time your character was unfaithful. You remember it happening. And you get to work with the same cast and crew for year after year. I was really, really happy to be a part of all that."

So she just quit?

"I thought, well, I have to leave, because I have to go and do this play in Chicago."

[\[Most read\] Congress overrode Trump's veto. The president's response? 'Pathetic!!!' »](#)

That pulled her lunch guest up short. An actress leaves a hit TV show that has been going gangbusters for a decade to do a play at a midsize Chicago theater? That's one crazy sacrifice, you'd think, even if it seems possible that the show would have legs that stretched to Broadway (not that anybody is talking about that).

FEEDBACK

"A sacrifice? Not really," Oh said, smiling. "Not when it's all part of moving on. I felt 10 years was enough. And 'Death and the Maiden' is a very deep play. I feel a very big responsibility doing this in Chicago. If you are not completely there emotionally, it's hard to find the beats, the glue of the character and the complexity of the work."

Presumably Oh is not working for the same scale as her last TV gig. She laughed at that notion.

"Being able to come here and do it is part of the amazing grace of having been able to do network television for so long. I really caught the tail end of the golden age of network television. It has just become so much harder now for actors to sustain a living."

Oh may be a TV star, but she has training and a background in live theater, mostly on the West Coast, where she has been living. She is, she says, an inveterate taker of classes, constantly studying her craft. "You know," she said, "TV is wonderful, but it's a medium that constantly breaks your heart. It has made me crave the process of theater. The theater uses different muscles. It is about filling your whole body."

LATEST THE THEATER LOOP

Chicago's Steep Theatre adds 13 members to its growing ensemble

DEC 29, 2020

Rebecca Luker, Tony-nominated 'Mary Poppins,' 'Music Man' star, dies at 59

DEC 23, 2020

For actress E. Faye Butler, the show must go on, even on the back of a truck

DEC 22, 2020

Review: Steppenwolf Theatre's 'Wally World' takes on life on a retail treadmill

DEC 18, 2020

Joffrey Ballet gets \$3 million in new funding from Abbott Labs

DEC 17, 2020

FEEDBACK

Cristina Yang, by the way, has left Seattle for Switzerland. If only Paulina were so lucky. But then, of course, the absence of that peace, the presence of so much pain, is what makes her so rich and challenging to play.

*"Death and the Maiden" runs through July 20 at the Victory Gardens Theater, 2433 N. Lincoln Ave.; 773-871-3000 or **victorygardens.org***

[**cjones5@tribune.com**](mailto:cjones5@tribune.com)

Twitter @ChrisJonesTrib

Topics: [Grey's Anatomy \(tv program\)](#), [Victory Gardens Theatre](#), [Entertainment](#), [ABC](#), [Sandra Oh](#), [Glenn Close](#)

Taboola Feed

Amazon Prime Increased Its Prices. Now What?

FEEDBACK

PITAL ONE SHOPPING | SPONSORED

If You Like to Play, this Fantasy Game is a Must-Have. No Install.

ELVENAR - FREE ONLINE GAME | SPONSORED

If You Can Qualify for Any Credit Card, These Are the Top 6

NERDWALLET | SPONSORED

Finally - New Clear, Comfy, Sociable Mask, With Anti-Fog Arrives In United States