



WITH HEDY WEISS

onstage

Winter greenery

As an actress in films, television and onstage, Olympia Dukakis' timing could not be more impeccable. Yet in real life, you have to wonder: What could possibly have possessed this Academy Award winner to sign on for a directing gig in Chicago in the deep-freeze months of winter?

"Oh, well," said the actress, offering a "that's how it goes" look as she sat in the lobby of the Victory Gardens Greenhouse recently, dressed in black leggings and boots and a red down jacket that stylishly set off her bobbed white hair and dark eyes.

In fact, the thing that has brought Dukakis to Chicago is Todd Logan's new play, "Botanic Garden" — the tale of a fortysomething widow who is about to start dating again, even as the memory of her husband becomes exceedingly palpable. An added incentive was the opportunity to work with actors Carmen Roman and James Leaning, both longtime members of the Chicago theater community and the American Theater Company ensemble. Roman and Leaning, who are married in real life, often must work in different parts of the country (she in New York and elsewhere, on the East Coast, he in Chicago), but they happen to be ideal for this play.

"I've known Carmen for about two years," said Dukakis. "We met at an actors' congress in New York and started talking. Later, I invited her to my Manhattan apartment for one of my once-a-month get-togethers, where a bunch of us talk about the dilemma of being an actor: One of the things we discuss is how we often feel marginalized in the rehearsal process — unless the theater company is particularly focused on the actors' input, or unless you have your own company, as I did twice in my life."

It was Roman who brought Logan's play to Dukakis and asked if she would be interested in directing her and Leaning.

"I certainly was interested," said Dukakis, a handsome woman who could easily pass for two decades younger than her 76 years, and whose energy and enthusiasm are



'BOTANIC GARDEN' | Veteran actress Olympia Dukakis brings green thumb to Victory Gardens director's role



Carmen Roman and James Leaning, married in real life, get a chance to work together at Victory Gardens in the new play "Botanic Garden," directed by Olympia Dukakis (above).

'BOTANIC GARDEN'

- Opens tonight; runs through March 9
- Victory Gardens Greenhouse Theater, 2257 N. Lincoln
- Tickets, \$35
- (773) 871-3000

set to "high."

"This story needed to be told, it was worth telling, and there was some beautiful writing in it," she said. "It still needed some work to help it emerge — including a great deal of editing — but I thought I could make it happen."

"There is comedy in this play,

but it also is very moving in the way it shows the effort required for us to begin our lives again, to let go of the wounds and bruises, to move on. And it's not just about losing a spouse; it can be about people picking up after losing a job or whatever. It's about the way spirits don't rest until certain things get settled."

Although Dukakis has a long list of film and television credits, she began her career in the theater and has spent a great deal of her time working as both an actress and director, often appearing with her husband, Chicago-bred actor Louis Zorich, to whom she has been married for more than four decades. (Zorich will visit several acting

schools in Chicago during the run of the play and talk about his book, *What Have You Done?*, a collection of audition stories.)

The daughter of Greek immigrants, Dukakis (whose cousin, Michael Dukakis, was the former governor of Massachusetts and the Democratic presidential nominee in 1988), was born in Lowell, Mass. She studied physical therapy at Boston University because she thought it would be a good way to make a living and needed a scholarship. Dukakis then spent two years — during the height of the U.S. polio epidemic in the early 1950s — working with patients in West Virginia, Houston, Duluth, Minn., and Boston.

While back at Boston University to earn a graduate degree, she spent several months as an associate director at a summer theater, and when there was a shortage of actresses she stepped in and was immediately hooked. Eventually, she started her own theater in Boston and finally moved on to New York. She and Zorich would later co-found the Whole Theatre, based in Montclair, N.J., the town where they also raised their three (now grown) children. (It folded in the early 1990s.)

"I've always liked being part of a theater company — the community of actors, the sense of continuity," said Dukakis. "I liked being an artistic director, but I especially enjoyed being a producer."

It was not until 1987, when she was 56, that Dukakis became "an overnight success" in the movies.

"[Director] Norman Jewison gave me the role of Rose Castorini [Cher's no-nonsense Italian-American mother] in *Moonstruck* and it changed my life," said Dukakis, who received the best supporting actress Oscar for her portrayal. "For the first time, I could stop worrying about money, and I could pay my daughter's college tuition without credit cards." (Her daughter is now an actress and teacher, while one of her sons works as a news producer and the other is in the business world.)

Though clearly a little disappointed that she wasn't nominated for a supporting actress Oscar this year for her role in Sarah Polley's film, *Away from Her* (in which she plays the caregiving wife of an Alzheimer's-stricken man, and has a brief fling with the husband of a similarly-afflicted woman played by Julie Christie), Dukakis has two intriguing indie movie projects in the offing.

"In one, a black comedy called 'Poor Things,' I team up with Shirley MacLaine to scam some homeless guys out of their insurance policies," says Dukakis. "The other movie is a road picture, and I play a mother traveling with her grown children."

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