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Chris Jones | *The Theater Loop*

Dukakis finds Chicago is growing on her

Olympia Dukakis has never really been on the Chicago theater radar.

She is, of course, an esteemed movie star, and, ever since "Moonstruck" made her a household name, an iconic celebrity. Now 77 years old, she also has a long and distinguished history on stage, both on and off Broadway, and was the producing artistic director of the now-defunct Whole Theatre in New Jersey for 19 years. An especially fine classical actress, Dukakis is frequently on the boards at Hartford Stage and Trinity Repertory. But almost all of her high-profile theater



Dukakis

work has been done, as they say, "back East." It's remarkable, then, that Dukakis currently is staying in a Chicago apartment, directing a small, new two-character play, "Botanic Garden" by the Chicago playwright Todd Logan, in a little commercial production now in previews at the Victory Gardens Greenhouse. The show, about the lifelong travails of love and marriage, opens Feb. 8.

It's even more remarkable yet that Dukakis may appear—as an actress—next year at the American Theater Company in a Eduardo Machado play titled "That Night in Hialeah."

What, one wonders, has caused Dukakis to suddenly discover the pleasures of Chicago theater? It's really more of a who.

Dukakis has become friends with the long-time Chicago actress Carmen Roman. Roman, who stars in "Botanic Garden" with her husband, Jim Leaming, has been talking up Chicago with Dukakis for a long time.

"I met Carmen in New York," Dukakis said this earlier this week. "She brought the play to me and said 'would you like to do this.' I read it and thought, yes, I would like to do it. I hadn't directed in about eight years."

She says she likes directing in a small theatrical joint. And she has a tradition of working in ensemble-based theaters such as the ones here. "In Chicago," Dukakis says, "the actor feels much more involved with the process. As opposed to New York, where the actor is strangely and pitifully marginalized. The last play I did in New York, I was told the director did not want me to talk to the playwright and the playwright was not per-

mitted to talk to me. ... What has happened to us? What is going on?"

Not this time. "It's a very intimate kind of experience," she says of her process at the Victory Gardens. "Everyone is in the kitchen cooking. Everyone is involved."

Through her entire career, Dukakis had only been to Chicago two or three times. But she says this play was enough to coax her to the Midwest. "It's a play about beginning again," she says, "about the difficulties we face letting life in and going forward after some tragic experience or loss. We seem to be fearful and not trusting of life."

Because it's a premiere and especially because Dukakis' name is attached, the piece is likely to get some national attention. "I try not to think about those things," she says. "I try to decide to do something because I want to do it here. If it has a life afterward, great, wonderful, terrific. But it has to be that this is enough."

"Botanic Garden" plays through March 9 at the Victory Gardens Theater Greenhouse, 2257 N. Lincoln Ave.; \$25-\$40, 773-871-3000.

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