

LA STAGE TIMES

FIRST PERSON

Death Row Deadlines in *Coyote on a Fence*

by James Warwick | August 29, 2013

I came to live in the United States of America 16 years ago from my home town of London, England. I'd been through the usual professional English actor route of training at one of the major drama schools (in my case, Royal Central School), and I embarked on a decade or so of regional theater productions developing my craft.

In those far-off days, it was quite common to get a year's contract and do a different play every three weeks. I learned tough but invaluable lessons that served me well as I transitioned into playing leading parts in London's West End on longer scheduled runs. BBC Television and some independent television companies were producing classic series around this time and I was fortunate to be part of several Masterpiece Theatre co-productions with WGBH Boston. *Crime, Lillie* and *Edward VII* were just a few of the well-written, well-crafted television exports from England to America that brought me to these shores and a whole new chapter in my life. *Partners in*

After a Broadway run of *An Ideal Husband* and a US national tour of *Camelot* in the '90s, I started directing theater and realized a new passion. I've always immersed myself in the written word and

have great respect for those dramatists who create well structured and challenging new scripts for theater and film. One of my early productions was a play called Coyote on a Fence, by the Philadelphia writer, Bruce Graham.



Rob Nagle & Cody Kearsley in "Coyote on a Fence." Photo by Jujube Zaoer.

Illiterate but likable Bobby Reyburn is a funny young guy who loves to do animal impressions. He's also a member of the Aryan Nation, a racist predator convicted of a horrific crime. John Brennan is educated and arrogant, a serious writer who may be guilty only of doing society a favor. As each



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awaits his fate, one evokes sympathy, the other derision. Set in a maximum security prison, the play examines the punishment process for violent crime in this country, and asks questions about how best we can preserve our Western values and human decency.

Big themes – and a subject that as an Englishman I didn't know nearly enough about. I managed to get a special pass (hard to obtain, I discovered) to visit the Death Row block of San Quentin outside San Francisco. I shall remember that experience in every detail for the rest of my life. I started to understand a little of Bruce Graham's powerful play and went into rehearsal with a group of four good actors at the Berkshire Theatre Festival in Massachusetts a few weeks later.

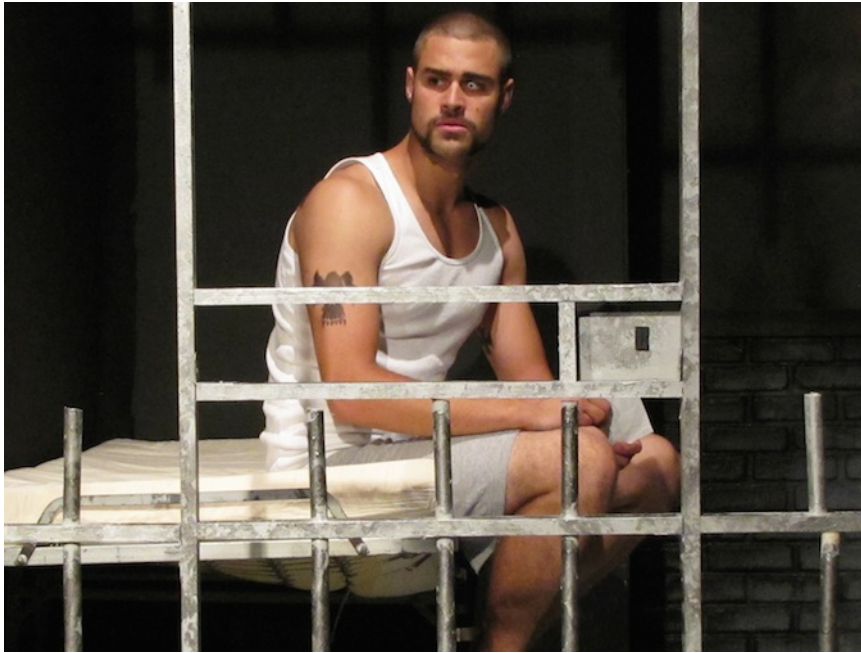
The play is without an intermission and runs about 90 minutes, and I was profoundly moved by the audience reaction over the three-week run. The

actors and I somehow found an authentic voice for the characters and their situation and I determined that if ever the opportunity arose, I would address this magnificent writing by Bruce Graham again at some time in the future.

More than a decade has passed since that production and this June, having moved across country to Los Angeles in 2009 to run a venerable drama school called Theatre of Arts in Hollywood, I re-read *Coyote on a Fence* with a view to a second-year students' production. However, I also started

thinking how it could be a window to the work that we do here at TOA for prospective students.

Two of our senior adjunct faculty, Rob Nagle and Benjamin Mathes, agreed to take part as the



Cody Kearsley

brilliant professional actors they are. One of our recent outstanding alumni, Cody Kearsley, auditioned and was cast in the pivotal role of Bobby Reyburn. And the super-talented Lisa Valenzuela stepped into the role of Shawna, the prison guard, the week before we started rehearsals.

Over this last month, I've been reminded again of why I wanted to do this play and wondered quite how I could have been blessed to be surrounded each day by my dream cast. We open previews today and run Saturdays and

Sundays, two shows a day, for the next three weekends until Sunday, Sept 15. My term as president of Theatre of Arts will conclude at that time, as I head back to the East Coast to resume my freelance directing career.

However, I would like to dedicate this production to those who feel the need to train as a serious professional actor. If they visit our campus, they will see not only a challenging powerful play but the skill and craft of consummate acting in performance.

Coyote on a Fence, Arena Stage, 1625 N. Las Palmas Ave., Hollywood 90038. Opens Saturday. Sat 5 and 8 pm, Sun 4 and 7 pm. at 8 pm. Through September 15. Tickets: \$20. www.eventbrite.com/event/7690738205. 323-463-2500.