

By Martin Morrow

Published November 13, 2015

Skewing gender politics in sex-scandal play

Domesticated



To say that Paul Gross is drawn to bellicose projects wouldn't be stretching things. When he isn't making films about Canada's military role in Afghanistan (*Hyena Road*) or the First World War (*Passchendaele*), he's onstage, locked in that eternal battle of the sexes.

A few seasons ago he held his own admirably against Kim Cattrall in a Toronto-Broadway revival of Noel Coward's warring-couple classic *Private Lives*. But in his latest show, *Domesticated*, he's really taking a beating – much of it at the hands of his real-life wife, Martha Burns.

Gross and Burns are starring in the Canadian premiere of Bruce Norris's comedy, produced by Toronto's Company Theatre and Canadian Stage, which focuses on a married politician brought down by a sex scandal. Bill, played by Gross, is discovered with a prostitute after she suffers a severe head injury, an indiscretion that destroys his career and brings on a crapstorm of legal and domestic woes. Most appalled is his long-time wife, Judy (Burns), who rips into him with the righteous wrath of a woman deceived as she begins to learn of his Eliot Spitzer-like past.

It might seem a surprising choice of play for married actors who haven't performed together onstage in 31 years. In fact, Gross says the show's director, Philip Riccio, was initially wary of casting them both.

"I think Phil probably thought we'd slit each other's throats during rehearsals," says the former *Due South* dreamboat, now, at 56, a silver fox. "But I thought right away it would be fantastic for the two of us to do."

"We don't really work together at all very much," adds Burns, 58. She and Gross are speaking in the boardroom at the Berkeley Street Theatre, where the play begins previews on Nov. 17. The last time they teamed up was

nearly a decade ago in the cult TV series *Slings & Arrows*, "which was really fun," she says. "So the opportunity to try it again, we couldn't pass up.

"And we haven't had a big fight yet," she adds. At which point Gross knocks wood on the boardroom table.

The couple were enamoured of Norris's script. The Chicago playwright is best known for his 2011 Pulitzer Prize winner *Clybourne Park*, a caustic comedy about race and real estate. But *Domesticated*, which made its off-Broadway debut in 2013, is even more stinging in its satire of gender politics, going so far as to question the function and future of men.

"I feel like there are very few playwrights today writing, as Bruce Norris is, about subjects that actually matter, where the stakes are up there and where he isn't afraid to push them further," Gross says. "I think this is a hysterically funny piece; moving, hopefully, and also wildly uncomfortable."

"I amuse myself thinking about how people are going to react to this," Burns adds. "I think of certain people I know sitting in the audience and just being really mad and wanting to walk out. And there are some who'll love it."

Gross and Burns themselves have divergent feelings about the play's horndog anti-hero. "The play is kind of like the *Book of Job*," Gross says, "where God has been substituted for the equally implacable and mysterious forces of social convention, and Bill can't seem to understand why they're taking it out on him."

But wait: *Job* was a good man, while Bill is a liar and a serial adulterer. "Oops," Burns says to her husband with a laugh. "You'd better come up with a better analogy."

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“Well, I think he sees himself that way,” Gross counters. “Bill is never indicted for anything and yet his life is destroyed. He’s undergoing a punishment far greater than most people would for a criminal offence. I’m not trying to defend his actions in the play, but I think Norris is asking whether this is fair and just or whether, as a society, we’re hypocrites.”

The play does have its poignant moments, particularly in Bill and Judy’s recollections of their student courtship. Burns and Gross have a sweet courtship story themselves. They met in 1983 in Ottawa when they were cast in a National Arts Centre production of Sharon Pollock’s historical drama Walsh. Gross played a Mountie and Burns was Sitting Bull’s daughter. “This was in the days before cultural appropriation was unacceptable,” Gross says. “So she had masses of tan makeup on. We’d occasionally neck backstage and then I would show up in a scene with these brown streaks all over my face.”

They acted together onstage again the following year in the Marivaux comedy Successful Strategies at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal – and that was it, until now. It wasn’t intentional: Gross’s career veered off into television and film. Burns herself has been less involved in theatre in recent years, doing her own TV work.

After 27 years as husband and wife, do they have any secret for sustaining a marriage? “The greatest trait you require is stubbornness,” Gross says. “You just have to be stubborn to keep it going. There’s something quite wise in those words, ‘For better, for worse.’ You’re going to go through periods where it’s awful, in every marriage, but somehow if you keep at it you’ll get to the other side of that.

“But living with me is easy,” he adds. A claim Burns only answers with a sardonic laugh.