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Section: WEEKEND**Edition:** AM**Page:** W3**ODD DUCK OUT****LA MIRADA THEATRE'S SATIRICAL LOOK AT THE ANIMAL KINGDOM SHEDS LIGHT ON HUMAN NATURE**

*By Alessandra Djurklou
Staff writer*

There are few among us who have not felt left out in our own families at some point in our lives. And that is even the case with ducks, or at least, it is according to ``Everything's Ducky," a brand-new musical that makes its West Coast premiere at the La Mirada Theatre tonight.

``Everything's Ducky" was written by Henry Krieger (``Dreamgirls"), Bill Russell and Jeffrey Hatcher, and is directed by Gip Hoppe. The musical tells the story of Serena, an awkward fowl in a family full of attractive ducks.

``Basically, it's `The Ugly Duckling' meets `Cinderella,' " said actress Natalie Toro, who plays lead duck Serena. Toro is a Broadway veteran who has been in such shows as ``Evita," ``Cats" and ``Les Miserables." ``It's about finding yourself and fitting in."

The family lives in a barnyard, and as the story begins, a precarious truce between carnivores and herbivores (ducks dominate this barnyard, so everyone is officially vegetarian) is about to be broken. A wolf is suspected of breaking his vegetarian vows by attacking some sheep, and the prince of ducks, Prince Drake, is asked to solve the crime.

Serena suddenly finds herself torn between two suitors -- the prince and his prime suspect, Wolf.

``He's the bad boy," said Toro of Wolf, played by John Herrera, another Broadway veteran who was nominated for a Tony for his work in ``The Mystery of Edwin Drood."

``I'm kind of a wolf in sheep's clothing," Herrera said.

Tired of always being pegged as the ugly duckling, Serena falls for Wolf, who whisks her to the big city. But once there, will he succumb to his basic instincts?

For the answer to that, you'll have to see the production. But, ``Ducky" writers caution, don't expect Serena to be a typical passive fairytale heroine.

“We wanted her to save herself,” said Hatcher.

“She’s in a very bad situation and works out a plan,” said Russell.

This is the first collaboration between Hatcher, Russell and Krieger. Krieger is best known for his award-winning musical “Dreamgirls,” which tells the story of the Supremes.

Krieger and Russell have worked together once before, when they teamed up to produce “Side Show,” a musical about Siamese twins who make their living in a circus. “Side Show,” Krieger said, was also about not fitting in, but took a much darker approach.

“We wanted to do a very light subject after that,” Krieger said. “Bill suggested we look at ‘The Ugly Duckling.’”

“I remembered the Little Golden Book from my childhood,” said Russell. “And we began riffing on what would happen to the duckling when she became a swan.”

This is the writing team’s first venture into a genre which uses animals to tell a story. But, Krieger says, that does not make it a children’s story.

“We’re not catering to any age group,” he said.

One way of keeping the production from getting too childlike is to avoid putting the actors in fur and feathers.

“We don’t wear fur or masks, but all the costumes suggest animals,” said Herrera.

Wolf, for example, is “a sharp dresser, a lady killer” Herrera added.

And to further drive home the fact that he is a wolf?

“I howl, I bark, I’m kind of finding my inner carnivore,” Herrera said, adding that his being cast in the role probably had something to do with his lupine facial features.

“All cast members kind of look like the animals they are playing,” Herrera said.

Director Gip Hoppe points out that there are also practical reasons for not dressing the cast in animal costumes.

“It’s not fair to the actors to be covered in fur,” Hoppe said, adding that such costumes are too constricting.

The lack of fur and feathers does not appear to have hurt the show so far. It has had good reviews in St. Louis and Cincinnati.

Illustration: Natalie Toro and Tony Capone star in “Everything’s Ducky.”

Left: John Herrera, Toro and Tracey Conyer Lee, right, in a scene from “Everything’s Ducky.”

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