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Elizabeth McGovern Is Riveting as Ava Gardner

Steve Gottfried · Tuesday, May 2nd, 2023

Considered one of Hollywood's most glamorous leading ladies of her era, Ava Gardner's off-screen romances rivaled those of Liz Taylor. Playing now through May 14th at the Geffen Playhouse, Elizabeth McGovern excavates her legacy in *Ava: The Secret Conversations*. The play, written by McGovern, is adapted from a book based on a series of interviews between Gardner and her biographer Peter Evans. The role fits McGovern like a pair of vintage gloves. But it is by no means a vanity piece.

Instead, it offers a very human portrait of a woman looking back on a life in the spotlight with a jaundiced eye but who never lost sight of the girl from Grabtown, North Carolina and her humble beginnings.

Asked what it was like bringing Gardner's story to the stage, McGovern said "It's this kind of passing of the torch from actress to actress and generation to generation. It's a wonderful, invisible thread, and I do feel it."

Elizabeth McGovern as Ava Gardner in *Ava: The Secret Conversations*

As the play begins, Ms. Gardner is 60 years old, living in an elegant London residence, two years into recovery from a stroke which left her physically and financially impaired. It's for the latter reason that she agrees to team up with a British writer named Peter Evans (played by Aaron Costa Ganis) to pen her autobiography. As she is famously quoted in the play: "I either write the book or sell the jewels, and I'm kinda sentimental about the jewels." Financial incentive is something Ava and Peter share in common, with Peter temporarily setting aside his loftier literary ambitions as a great novelist in exchange for a lucrative celebrity tell-all in order to support his family. This three-person play also stars Ryan W. Garcia as Evans' literary agent who is heard in voiceover but never seen onstage.

Boozy, bawdy and brilliant, McGovern delivers a performance as multi-faceted as Ms. Gardner's jewels. And while this is an undeniable star turn for McGovern, the play succeeds by virtue of the interplay between her and her biographer, played to perfection by Aaron Costa Ganis. Peter is tasked with walking a tightrope, enthralled by the grandeur of Gardner's legacy while trying to extract salacious tidbits about her relationships with her famous exes which included three failed marriages to Mickey Rooney, Frank Sinatra and Artie Shaw as well as a 20-year-long relationship with Howard Hughes.

The play interweaves theatrical flashbacks with Gardner and her famous exes with Ganis taking on the personas of the men in her life, giving the audience a taste of the interpersonal dynamics. This theatrical conceit might have been a risk, but it works in large part due to the writing as well as Ganis' chameleon-like ability to take on the men in her life. In the process, he finds himself being drawn under her spell. It's a dance of sorts which evolves into a tango and ultimately ends with a twist.

Aaron Costa Ganis and Elizabeth McGovern co-star in "Ava: The Secret Conversations"

From a production standpoint, "Ava: The Secret Conversations" captures the Old Hollywood glamour of Gardner's existence even though the play is set in London in the 1980s where Gardner lived toward the latter part of her life. The production elements are beautifully in synch from the pitch-perfect set design by David Meyer to the evocative wardrobe by Toni-Lesli James to the vintage film and photographs projected onstage and the period music, all of which transport the audience back in time.

As Elizabeth McGovern says in a promotional video for the play: "It's a play about movies and the impact that the movie business had (and has) on the people who are its stars. I hope people feel viscerally what it might have been like to be in her position." By this reviewer's estimation, I say *mission accomplished*.

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(Images by Jeff Lorch)

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