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Plot twist in his life leads actor to reunion on stage with mom

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WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



Ryan Kathman, 29, gives his birth mother, Moira Mangiameli, 50, a hug Tuesday at Barry's Bar & Grill in Lincoln, where the actors will play mother and son in an production of "True West" next month. JON LEMONS/THE WORLD-HERALD

Ryan Kathman has been thinking a lot lately about nature versus nurture. Last week, the young actor found not only his birth mother, but in her, he found an acting partner as well.

Next month they'll share a stage in Lincoln — playing mother and son.

Kathman, a student one year shy of his master of fine arts degree in acting at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, was adopted as an infant in 1980.

Tracking down his birth mother using his birth certificate, he was flabbergasted to learn on Google that she had earned the very degree he's working on nine years ago at UNL.

His birth mother, Moira Mangiameli, 50, has earned acting accolades at the Omaha Community Playhouse and other area theaters since before Ryan was born.

And Mangiameli's father, the late Bob Reilly, taught newswriting at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Before beginning his grad-school studies in theater, Kathman wrote for a suburban newspaper in the Twin Cities.

"I've always kind of been an oddball in my family for doing writing and theater," Kathman said. "None of them do that."

His parents, Dennis and Norma Kathman of Bellevue, supported Ryan when he chose his careers. The Kathmans had met in the U.S. Air Force and adopted Ryan and another younger boy while stationed at Offutt Air Force Base. Two daughters were born to them later. Norma Kathman told Ryan and his brother when they were very young that they were adopted.

Mangiameli married her husband, Mark, in 1985. Their two sons, Matthew, 23, and Nicholas, 20, didn't share mom's interest in theater. Mangiameli and her family spoke of the boy she gave up often through the years, referring to him by the name she gave him at birth, Brendan.

"After I gave Ryan up, I grieved a long time," Mangiameli said. "I never thought I did a wrong thing giving him up. I knew I didn't have the capability to take care of him then."

She was 21 and a student.

"But when you have a child, you fall in love. There's always been that hole there, even with my marriage and my boys."

Now, she said tearfully as she sat next to Kathman at a Lincoln restaurant Tuesday afternoon, that hole is filled.

"It's the kind of thing you can never repay, what (Mangiameli) did for me," Kathman responded. "But I'm just so thankful for the opportunity to try."

Both families have been supportive about the reunion and enthusiastic about meeting their new relatives.

"There's no downside to this," Kathman said. "I can't wait to meet this huge chunk of Omaha I'm related to."

In addition to her husband and two boys, Mangiameli has nine brothers and sisters.

Next month Kathman and Mangiameli will play mother and son in an Angels Theatre Co. production of "True West" in Lincoln. The casting was engineered by director Judith Hart, founder of Angels, who had planned to play Ryan's mother herself.

"Having these two marvelous actors play their real-life roles is the best kind of theater, epic and remarkable," said Hart, who in 2005 directed Mangiameli in "Pride's Crossing" at the Omaha playhouse.

Kathman and Mangiameli have since learned that their paths crossed a number of times.

They competed for the same acting scholarship at the regional Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival in 2000.

"She was better than me," he said, as Mangiameli laughed. "She got into the finals. But I was just a sophomore in college then."

The two were cast together in a play at the Great Plains Theatre Conference in May, unaware of their connection as they sat next to each other for the performance.

She saw Ryan perform in "The Cripple of Inishman" last year at the Nebraska Repertory Theatre in Lincoln, opposite Hart. Afterward, she gushed to Hart about how impressed she was with Ryan's performance.

"I was in the play, too, Moira," Hart teased her friend.

It was Kathman who made the reunion happen, starting the process with Catholic Charities in 2007. His adopted brother had found his birth mother a few years before, opening a door Kathman had long left closed.

The day they met, Mangiameli walked into a room at Catholic Charities to find Kathman and his wife, Jenny, seated on a sofa. He stood and opened his arms for a hug.

"He was a little misty, and I was crying, and I said, 'You were considerably smaller the last time I did this,'" she laughed.

"I only regret I didn't do this sooner," he said. "I love investigating things as a reporter. But for a long time it felt taboo."

Mangiameli said she, too, had been afraid.

"But I never lost faith. My whole life I knew I'd meet him again. Now I'm just walking around in a daze of joy, all the time."

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