

Review: ‘Apple Season’ suggests you can always go home again, but should you?



Liza Fernandez, left, and Justin Huen star in “Apple Season.” (Benjamin Simpson)

By CHARLES MCNULTY
THEATER CRITIC

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“Apple Season,” a new play by E.M. Lewis at Atwater Village Theatre, seems like it dropped out of a 1950s time capsule.

A character burdened by a traumatic past is forced to confront what she has been running from her adult life. She’s offered the chance to re-create her future with someone she left behind long ago, but the prospect of staying seems as impossible to her as the possibility of forgetting.

The play bears some resemblance to the work of Horton Foote, except Lewis’ geography is more vague. The rural Oregon setting is less distinct than Foote’s fictional town of Harrison, Texas. And the culture seems generalized, a theatrical nowhere pretending to be a western somewhere.

This is the kind of piece that needs to be deeply inhabited, but Lewis has prepared only a dramatic sketch. And the disparate company is unable to furnish what hasn’t yet been fully imagined.

Even the set of this Moving Arts production, directed by Darin Anthony, is unconvincing. The apple orchard conjured by set designer Stephanie Kerley Schwartz looks like a display of artificial Christmas trees at Target.

Lissie (Liza Fernandez), an unmarried teacher in her early middle years, has returned to her family's farm, which she fled as a schoolgirl with her brother, Roger (Justin Huen), to escape her father's abuse. The father's funeral has brought both Lissie and Roger back to the site of their mangled childhood.

No sooner does Roger return than he leaves. Lissie has unfinished business she has no idea how to resolve. Billy (Rob Nagle), a neighbor who was friends with her brother and still vividly remembers kissing Lissie before she disappeared from town, wants to buy the property and, if she's willing, allow him to rescue her. He seems to have been waiting for her all these years. But how can she create a home in the place that shattered her sense of security?

Flashbacks provide glimpses of Lissie and Roger's violent upbringing. The actors emotionally invest themselves, but the play's dramatic shorthand asks too much while providing too little.

Complicating matters is the cast's lack of chemistry. Romantic sparks don't exactly fly between Nagle's earnest-as-an-egg Billy and Fernandez's ferociously flailing Lissie. The combustible sadness of Huen's Roger, an itinerant rancher who has given up on the possibility of renewal, is more compelling. But the character is relegated to the dim margins.

Lewis, justly celebrated for her award-winning "Song of Extinction," is sensitively attuned to Lissie's dilemma. How can this woman free herself of the pain and shame that have entwined themselves in her identity? But the situation isn't credibly developed. The ending of "Apple Season" takes a daring leap, but the metaphoric flourish seems as spurious as the apples piled in crates like holiday ornaments.

'Apple Season'

Where: Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Ave., L.A.

When: 8 p.m. Fridays, 4 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 4 p.m. Sundays, 8 p.m. Mondays.

Tickets: \$24-\$30

Information: (323) 472-5646 or movingarts.org

Running time: 1 hour, 10 minutes

"I could not believe McNulty's review in *LA Times*! I mean the set was wonderful and the use of the space -- which is SO limited -- worked so well with the present and the flashbacks. And I guess he doesn't remember or doesn't know about people who are attracted to each other but no chemistry. That was the problem in high school and the problem now! I think he really judged this show too harshly. I had tears almost going on almost the entire show! I just didn't want to sit on the front row weeping!"

- Kay Foster



Charles McNulty

Charles McNulty is the theater critic of the Los Angeles Times.
