



STAGE RAW

This is LA. This is your stage.

REVIEWS



Rob Nagle and Liza Fernandez in E.M. Lewis's *Apple Season*, Moving Arts at Atwater Village Theatre. (Photo by Benjamin Simpson)

Apple Season

Reviewed by Deborah Klugman

Moving Arts

Through August 5

Perhaps most notable among the many award received by playwright E.M. Lewis is the Steinberg award from the American Theatre Critics Association, garnered for *Song of Extinction*, which the L.A. troupe Moving Arts produced in 2008, and which won both an *LA Weekly* award for Best Production and the LADCC award for Outstanding New Play.

Now the company has mounted Lewis's *Apple Season*, a National New Play Network rolling world premiere directed by Darin Anthony. It's about a traumatized sister and brother who return to the family farmstead for the funeral of their abusive father after a 25-year absence. A reunion with an old friend brings dark secrets to the surface. While the production's tech elements provide a vivid backdrop and the dialogue is sound, the play itself is a disappointment: The plot traffics in tropes and the performances also seem like a work in progress.

The story opens in an apple orchard (a colorful, engaging set by Stephanie Kerley Schwartz) in rural Oregon. Lissie (Liza Fernandez) is occupied plucking apples from a tree when a neighbor, Billy (Rob Nagle), drops by. He hems and haws and the pair make tentative small talk until he comes around to stating the ostensible reason (but not the only one) for his visit — to inquire about the purchase of Lissie's property should she be inclined to sell.

But rather than give him a definite yes or no, Lissie remains cryptic about her intent, gruffly rejecting Billy's efforts to be friendly while doing her best to make him uncomfortable. The scene then shifts to the past, where she and her older brother Roger (Justin Huen) huddle in a tree in the rain, wary of going into their house until their presumably violent father leaves.

Throughout its hour-long length, the play alternates between the present — this encounter in the orchard, plus an earlier conversation between Billy and Roger in a bar — and flashbacks to their childhood and adolescence, when the boys were both on a basketball team and the teenage Billy developed a crush on Roger's little sister.

The central problem with *Apple Season* is the lack of surprises; it's far too easy to intuit what secrets will be unveiled. And there are gaps. Much of the dramatic tension revolves around the shadow of the abusive dad, but apart from our being apprised of his scurrilous act, and his grown children's antipathy towards him, we learn little of him: a faceless bogeyman who abused and terrorized his kids. There've been enough of these characters on stage and in film so that, without vivid details to bring this unseen predator to life, the drama becomes a by-the-numbers enactment.

As Lissie, Fernandez wraps herself with an air of injured scorn, but there are too few layers to observe. Nagle's timorous and unworldly farmer is on track, though the heat between him and Lissie, when it does emerge, isn't convincing. Like Nagle, Huen works with assiduous skill at his role, which requires that he play both a kid in flashback and an embittered loner in the present. But like much else in this drama, the character as conceived is thin and familiar.

Complementing the set, lighting designer Martha Carter's twilight hues and darker shadows draw an effective contrast between the narrative's here-and-now and the characters' memories. Warren Davis' sound is a striking element in a technically well-staged piece that you wish had been less predictable..

Moving Arts at Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas, Atwater Village; Fri.-Sat., Mon., 8 p.m.; Sun., 4 p.m.; through August 5; www.movingarts.org or call 323-472-5646 Running time: approximately one hour with no intermission.

