

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

CURRENT THEATRE REVIEWS by TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

APPLE SEASON



Photo by Benjamin Simpson

Moving Arts at Atwater Village Theatre

One thing that has emerged clearly for me in my many moons circling around on this silly planet is the undeniable fact that all art is imitation.

Whether you're in Plato's camp, believing this to be a bad thing, or follow Aristotle in his belief that this is a force for appreciating the good in nature and chronicling the bad as a warning to us all, after seven decades as an avid theatre whore and spending the last 33 of those years writing about it, I have to admit not much new or innovative has captured my attention in a long time.

There is surely nothing new explored in the National New Play Network Rolling World Premiere of E. M. Lewis' *Apple Season*, now debuting here presented by Moving Arts, as yet another wounded group of dysfunctional and severely damaged countryfolk living in Amurka's vast heartland desperately tries to hide vile and deep-seated family secrets.

However, there is one major source of innovation in this brilliantly mounted little diamond-in-the-rough of a play and

that's the lyrical, gossamer writing of Lewis, vividly bringing to life the claustrophobic lifestyle of these usually close-mouthed inhabitants of presentday rural Oregon, a place where, as she mentions in her script, time touches this part of the world gently.

Indeed, *Apple Season* appears to be a gentle play at first as Lissie Fogerty (Liza Fernandez) climbs a rickety old wooden ladder to harvest apples after her despised father's death on the family farm she abandoned as a sufficiently fucked-up teen, creating a tableau that, as noted by her brother Roger's childhood pal Billy Rizzell (Rob Nagle), seems to be unfolding as though the years between never happened.

There was a time, as Lissie tells Roger (Justin Huen) in one of the play's magical flashbacks to the Fogerty kids' teenaged years, when she doubted there was a universe beyond their property line, something the siblings found to be anything but the case after they ran off to navigate life beyond the family farm.

And just because Roger wants there to be somewhere besides this brutally unhappy little corner of the world that's the only place they've ever known, Lissie doesn't believe his wish for a better life can "imagine us into another place."

"Maybe I can," Roger responds defensively. "I could build us a road out of here... and then I could build us a car to drive off in."

In the play's 70 intermissionless minutes, we become mesmerically swept into their journey as we slowly begin to learn the dastardly though certainly not uncommon secrets which have infected the Fogertys' ability to live an untroubled life. This is first and foremost due to Lewis' jarring ability to create dialogue about planting the west field or the fact that Billy still drives the same baby-blue pickup truck he did at 15, and turn it into lovely, haunting Tennessee Williams-style poetry honoring the fragile nature of human need.

Adding to the debut of this arresting new play is the production itself from Moving Arts, playing in Atwater Village Theatre complex's tiniest and most severely limited 40-ish-seat black box space where designer Stephanie Kerley Schwartz has done a phenomenal job conjuring the Fogerty farm, including a hint of the property's roughhewn barn dominated by an orchard of maturely majestic apple trees full of ripe fruit (though on opening night, the crop could have been dulled and dirtied up a bit) just waiting to be picked and boxed, something which Lissie actually does as the play progresses.

Moving Arts' artistic director Darin Anthony stages the action with a smooth and lovingly delicate hand, as well as an uncanny ability to make the story swing back and forth through time from presentday to that half-century earlier with immeasurable help from lighting designer Martha Carter and the evocative ambient sound plot by Warren Davis.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the participation of a trio of actors willing to wholeheartedly take the ride, with special praise for Fernandez, who a few times must segue instantaneously from those painful childhood dramas back into the hardened, mistrusting woman Lissie has become over the ensuing years.

As always—and I defy any Los Angeles reviewer ever start a critique of this particular actor without beginning the first sentence with "as always"—Rob Nagle is exceptional in what could be a completely servile role, infusing his sheepish nebbish in an omnipresent John Deere ballcap with more raw emotion between his lines than when Billy gracelessly blurts out his feelings and the conflicted memories he shares with Lissie.

As Roger, the transition from volatile kid desperately trying to figure out how to unburden his sister of her horrendous existence at the hands of their drunken father to become a lost, heavy-drinking drifter who rides the rails to blot out the aching pain of his life, Huen is also subtly captivating, especially in his occasional monologue as he tries to pick up the pieces of his life's puzzle scattered in the dirt in front of him.

Anthony's direction and the work of these three amazing actors create an palpable ambience that completely draws us into the narrow but horrific little world existing just below the trio's bucolic smalltalk about when different varieties of apples

are most ready to harvest or why Billy is back home in his mid-30s living with his parents, ultimately making us wonder whether the demons that have come between he and Lissie can ever be overcome.

At one point in Lewis' indelible *Apple Season*, Billy observes that Lissie talks as though she's writing a book in her head about the early years of her life and wonders why she seems to be writing it from the brother's perspective and not the sister's. She explains that might be why she has chosen to spend her life teaching the fourth grade, a place where she doesn't have to worry about literary criticism past figuring out who did what to whom.

And why the fourth grade specifically? "Everything is incredibly awkward and dramatic then," she muses, "and once in awhile, it's astoundingly sweet." With that observation, E.M. Lewis has written the quintessential line to describe her own little gem of a play—especially the astoundingly sweet part.

THROUGH AUG. 5: Moving Arts at the Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Av., LA. 323.472.5646 or www.movingarts.org