

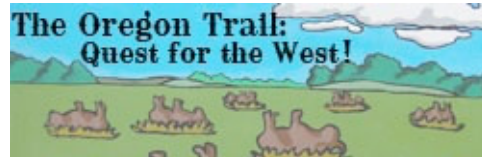


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Noah's Arkansas

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nytheatre.com review
[Martin Denton](#) · April 21, 2010

I'll begin with a bit of a disclaimer: I published Jerrod Bogard's play *The Spin Cycle* in my indie theater anthology [Plays and Playwrights 2010](#), and Wide Eyed Productions was one of nytheatre.com's People of the Year for 2009. So I am not entirely objective about the creators of *Noah's Arkansas*: I've already gone out on a limb about them and identified them as talented artists whose work is worth your attention.



Pictured: Bennett W. Harrell and Justin Ness in a scene from Noah's Arkansas (photo © Paul Newland)

That said, it is with a big happy sigh of relief that I report that this exquisite new play, written by Bogard and produced by Wide Eyed, has made me feel that my decisions were entirely justified. *Noah's Arkansas* is a heartfelt drama about family, trust, and the all-too-brief time we have together on this planet; it's possible to quibble about this or that decision, but Bogard's script is solid, intelligent, funny, and often

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profound, and the production, under the steady hand of director Neil Fennell, is beautifully wrought.

It unfolds in a trailer in a small town in Arkansas, the home of Wayne and Lizzy Riggins. They're rough-hewn but well-meaning people; Wayne, in particular, has gotten into trouble with his powder-keg-like temper, and wishes he were doing better and could afford to give his wife a nicer place to live.

Nearby lives Lester, Wayne's dad, who is in his 70s and beginning to feel the ravages of a cancer that he understands will soon defeat him. He's nonetheless a spry, shrewd old fellow, and he figures in the story more importantly than Bogard initially lets on.

The catalyst for the events in *Noah's Arkansas* is the annual summer arrival of Michael, Wayne's 14-year-old son. Michael lives during the school year in Tulsa with his mom (Wayne's ex-wife), and reluctantly spends his summers with Wayne and Lizzy. Michael is a troubled teen, and his appearance—a blue streak in his hair, a gold ring on his lip and a stud on his tongue—is only the surface indication of what's going on with this sensitive young man: Wayne learns that Michael spent some time recently in a mental institution. Bogard builds the first two acts of his play masterfully, delineating the tense relationship between father and son; the outcome of Act II, which probes what it means to care for, to trust, another human being, brings us to intermission with full hearts. And then the turn of events that Bogard presents in the final act both surprises and moves us, taking this story of fathers and sons to an even deeper, more fulfilling place.

The folks at Wide Eyed have mounted Bogard's script with the kind of attention and love that any playwright longs for. The naturalistic set by Joshua David Bishop provides a completely appropriate and convincing world for the play, loaded with enough realistic details to be believable but not so many that it overwhelms the story. Ditto Antonia Ford-Roberts's costumes, which all look—and this is meant as a compliment—as if they once were hanging on a rack in a Walmart.

The actors all do expert work. Judy Merrick and Bennett W. Harrell are, literally, the good cop and bad cop who figure in a couple of places in the story; they evoke their archetypes organically. Kristin Skye Hoffmann gives Lizzy a big heart and plenty of edge; it's easy to see why she puts up with Wayne and also how she (most of the time) keeps him in line.

The play belongs to the three generations of Riggins men, though. Erik Frandsen is superb as the grandfather, Lester, bringing a Sam Shepard-esque lyricism to a very realistic portrayal of a tough old coot who's gotten wiser as illness has overtaken him. Justin Ness reveals all of the contradictions of Wayne, a man who is well aware of his shortcomings but generally unable to rein them in. And Michael Komala not only convinces us that he's a teenager, but shows us the tough journey that Michael Riggins has already taken in life, as well as the one he undergoes during this play. The chemistry among all three of these actors is palpable; together they give us three generations to root for in a family rife with dysfunction.

So I am pleased to commend *Noah's Arkansas* to you. The young artists who have put it together are as skillful as they are insightful. The story they are sharing with audiences is one well worth hearing.

Opened: April 21, 2010

Closed: May 14, 2010

Artists Involved

Cast: Erik Frandsen, Bennett W. Harrell, Kristin Skye Hoffmann, Mike Komala, Lucy McRae, Judy Merrick, Justin Ness

Author: Jerrod Bogard

Director: Neil Fennell

Costumes: Antonia Ford-Roberts

Lighting: Ryan Metzler

Music: Michael Sorrentino

Sets: Joshua David Bishop

Sound: Trevor Dallier

Stage Manager: Megan Jupin

Producer: Wide Eyed Productions

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