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STAGE REVIEW

‘Storytelling’ in Wellfleet lands some punches



Adam Foster (Peck), Dakota Shepard (Caitlin), and Bridget K. Doyle (Dora) in “The Storytelling Ability of a Boy.”
(Jeff Zinn)

By [Don Aucoin](#)

WELLFLEET — Things get extreme in a hurry in Carter W. Lewis’s “The Storytelling Ability of a Boy.”

THE STORYTELLING ABILITY OF A BOY How extreme? Well, we have barely been introduced to a teenager named Dora before she has, um, *nailed her hand to a wall* in a high school hallway, using a nailgun she sees as a must-have accessory, the way more conventional girls might view a Prada purse or a pair of Uggs.

It’s jolting, yes. But the greater shock that lies in store for the audience at the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater, where “The Storytelling Ability of a Boy” is receiving its New England premiere in a production by the Boston Art Theatre, is what a strangely tender, ultimately moving ode to the power of friendship this play turns out to be.

Which is not to say it's not a bumpy ride. That nailgun is not the only weapon that will be brandished before the evening is over.

“The Storytelling Ability of a Boy” — which, by the way, is an awfully clunky, insipid title for such a provocative work — is directed by Robert Kropf in a no-holds-barred style that is in keeping with WHAT's edgy aesthetic and that is probably necessary for “Boy” to achieve its full effect. Kropf, artistic director of the Boston Art Theatre and a frequent performer on the WHAT stage (in fact, he's playing the title role in the current production of “Cyrano”), draws committed performances from his cast of three.

Dakota Shepard plays Caitlin, a new teacher seeking a fresh start. Caitlin left her previous teaching job, ostensibly because she was traumatized by a Columbine-style shooting that resulted in the deaths of three students and, eventually, the end of her marriage as she sealed herself off from her husband. “In this town, I'm not part of the story,” Caitlin says. “I like that.”

But soon she is drawn into the turbulent world of Peck (Adam Foster), a precocious student with a gift for writing, and Dora (Bridget K. Doyle), his close friend, soul mate, and fellow social outcast. Peck and Dora speak a private, shared language that is an alloy of wit, irony, theatricality, cultural references (including a sexual fantasy involving — brace yourself — Luciano Pavarotti), cynicism about adults, hipper-than-thou poses, and, beneath it all, vulnerability and longing. A writer to his marrow, Peck narrates their lives even as they unfold; he likes to say, by way of a storytelling transition, “And then something beautiful happens.”

It has to be said that the word-drunk Peck can be exhausting to listen to (picture “Howl” in spoken-monologue form). Yet his free-associative soliloquies and headlong flights of description (he tells Caitlin that her surname, Skreeting, “sounds like you put a cat in a waffle iron”) show undeniable talent, along with the classic adolescent need for self-expression.

Dora, meanwhile, expresses herself through elaborately sarcastic broadsides and attention-getting stunts like that horrifying episode of self-mutilation with the nailgun (which possibly stems from the fact that she was raised by a father who tried to sexually abuse her after her mother abandoned the family). When Caitlin starts to mentor Peck, excited by his potential, Dora treats the teacher with hostility and contempt; she feels threatened by Caitlin's incursion into their previously closed circle. But might there be more to the picture?

Shepard gives a performance expertly attuned to Caitlin's internal struggle as she tries to get past her past and nurture this new talent she has discovered, to fill the clean slate and get it right this time. (Alas, the playwright saddles Caitlin with a second-act revelation about her earlier life that feels like warmed-over Tennessee Williams). Doyle, who is WHAT's lighting designer (and fulfills that function with this production as well), proves an able performer, thoroughly inhabiting the difficult role of Dora and letting us see the wounded heart behind her self-protective scorn, but by degrees, not all at once.

As Peck, Foster builds a persuasive portrait of the artist as a young eccentric. Peck's initial bravado dwindles to something more interesting as it becomes clear that his third-person approach to narrating his life might be not just

the impulse of a born storyteller, but also a defense mechanism meant to establish a degree or two of separation from reality. The reality is that Peck is often on the receiving end of beat-downs by some of the less evolved members of the high school's jockocracy.

Indeed, an especially brutal beating of Peck sets in motion a series of events that will radically rearrange the emotional landscape in which all three characters operate, bringing them to the point of an explosive crisis that threatens to lay waste to everything they have come to care about.

And then, perhaps, something beautiful happens.