

# The Storytelling Ability of a Boy' could be worthy of national audience

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Florida Stage has become an artistic home away from home for a number of fine American playwrights, including St. Louis-based Carter W. Lewis, who has just watched his fifth play brought to life by the Manalapan theater.

Lewis' newest piece, *The Storytelling Ability of a Boy*, combines something its author says doesn't work onstage -- narrative -- with escalating drama, using both types of writing to tell the story of a brilliant-but-tormented high school kid, the smart best friend he'd rather romance, and the teacher who becomes entangled in both students' lives.

It's an unusual script, but that's exactly what gets director Louis Tyrrell's toes tingling and imagination soaring. And before much of it has played out, the audience feels the same.

*The Storytelling Ability of a Boy* is the theatrical equivalent of a chamber piece, an intense exploration of three characters whose dreams, losses and crises resonate because much of what they're going through -- high school as a circle of hell, loving without being loved in return, crossing dangerous emotional lines -- are things so many of us have lived.

Peck (Marshall Paillet) is the "boy" in the play's title, a 17-year-old whose clear literary gift draws the attention of his teacher Caitlin (Laura Carbonell), a divorced woman whose life has brought her to a fresh start in a small town at the age of 27.

A brainy punching bag for the school's moronic jocks, Peck hangs out with the *über*-intense Dora (Bethany Anne Lind), a similarly smart girl given to sometimes-gruesome cries for attention.

Caitlin tells Peck, who wishes Dora would be more than a best friend, that his pal isn't good for him.

Dora's angry reaction conceals deeper emotional damage and confusion. A complex triangle gets formed, with shifting relationships playing out in unexpected ways.

Lewis, Tyrrell and the fine cast deliver an intellectually and emotionally engaging drama with just-right shadings of humor; Dora, for example, describes the bright floral pattern of dress she's wearing as looking like "allergies."

The playwright artfully flips from dialogue to narrative at just the right moments, most chillingly when Caitlin shifts into third person to describe a budding romance gone horrifyingly wrong.

Lind, Carbonell and Paillet, who's terrific as he delves into that cauldron of thought and emotion that is the high school male, all deliver compelling performances (though you can't help thinking about excellent South Florida-based actors who might have been just as persuasive in creating these roles).

And though the sound, lighting and costume design all serve the play well, Victor Becker's simplistic set design isn't up to the company's usual impressive standards.

Still, Florida Stage is hewing to its mission here. In staging the premiere of *The Storytelling Ability of a Boy*, Tyrrell is giving his audiences the first look at a provocative play that's likely to find a life beyond South Florida.

*Christine Dolen is The Miami Herald's theater critic.*