

## Controlling the Narrative

by [Dedalus](#) 

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There's a lyric in "Rent" that says "The opposite of war isn't peace – it's creation!" A nice (if fatuous) sentiment that certainly appeals to those of us with an artistic bent. Now, in Carter W. Lewis' "The Storytelling Ability of a Boy," we see that sentiment given depth and scope, until, quite literally, the road away from a horrific act may lie in the creation of an "alternate ending," in, as the title says, the storytelling ability of a boy.

Caitlin (the always wonderful Suehyla El-Attar) is a not-yet-thirty high school creative writing teacher. Escaping from an act of violence in her old school district (not to mention a failed marriage and an even more painful event), she is hiding away in a small town school, teaching teens the healing mysteries of metaphor and narrative. Dora and Peck (Bethany Anne Lind and Nick Arapoglou) are a pair of damaged kids, struggling to get through the minefields of adolescent hormones, classroom bullies, parental dysfunction, and other extremes of small-town life. Peck is also a gifted writer, who often peppers his conversation with third-person narrative, as if he's the hero in his own story. The problem is, he has problems with endings – happy endings are so banal and "yesterday" and uncool. The problem becomes he's living a textbook case of a serial-killer life, and, if he doesn't take control of his story, the ending will write itself in a way that will be even more "uncool."

This is only the bare bones outline of what to expect if you trek to Lawrenceville for this play (and believe me, you should!). Along the way you will also get twists of forbidden love, grotesque scenes of acting out (I'll never look at a nail gun in the same way), a scene of simulated "sex with dead Luciano Pavoratti" (Junie B Jones has really grow'd up), a graphic description of one of the more bizarre suicides you're likely to encounter, small-town bigotry and bullying, coyotes and cattle, more than a few painfully funny conversations, more than a few edge-of-the-seat moments of tension and suspense.

Who finally controls the narrative of the story? I'll leave that for you to discover, though, I assure you, I left the theatre quite invigorated and not at all depressed.

All three actors give truly dynamic performances. Ms. El-Attar shows us a young woman whose life has made her too mature for her age (both kids express surprise she is actually under thirty). Yet, she has a warm charm that brings us into her story, and a coolness of sorrow when she begins to think she can't lead us safely out. Ms. Lind is confrontational and profane, yet, surprisingly vulnerable and engaging. She makes Dora's every encounter with Caitlin a battle that can only lead to a not-surprising kiss that sends the story seemingly out of anyone's control.

And Nick Arapoglou continues his unbroken series of outstanding performances, giving us a Peck who is both geeky and cool, funny and sad, creative-smart and adolescent-dumb. At one point he is savagely bullied by some classmates and can only crawl inside a garbage can and howl his pain and rage in a way that tore my heart apart. He hides behind his stories, and clings to both Dora and Caitlin as his only salvation, which, indeed they are.

Lewis writes very witty (if R-rated) dialogue that makes these characters come alive, that makes High School story-speech sound natural, that builds the story to its inevitable crisis. The characters are dialogue-specific, the actions simultaneously extreme and naturalistic, the plot threads seemingly out-of-control. He then makes it seem as if the characters themselves have taken control of his storytelling, damming up all the swirling streams of narrative into a river rushing headlong towards ... what?

And director Anthony Rodriguez has orchestrated a fast-paced (90 intermissionless minutes) narrative that flies by faster than an outrageously bizarre dress can fall to the ground, grounding it all with a profoundly sad cello score (played live by April Still). The intimacy of the Aurora's small black box theatre draws us into the lives (and loves) of these three people, making the kids' in-your-face outrageousness literally in our faces.

This is a play that suggests that narrative and life are inextricably bound, that bad things happen in our lives, but that we still control the flow of the story. It deepens and expands on the sound-byte simplicity of the "Rent" lyric in a

way that fully explains why the sound-byte is so appealing to me. This play says that, if the opposite of war is creation, then the opposite of terrorism is a new story.

To say I loved this play would be an understatement. I found the whole thing to be a perfect storm of writing, directing, and acting that, quite literally, left me breathless. And, since moments of the play linger in my thoughts days after seeing it, perhaps I'll remain breathless until the cows come home.

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