

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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The Children



Photo by Jenny Graham

Fountain Theatre

I am old enough to remember “Duck and Cover!” drills in our classrooms and sneaking down into the bomb shelter my father had built to get a peek at those ominous shelves full of canned food, bottled water, and batteries, not to mention standing in a long queue in my grade school’s dank basement hoping Dr. Salk’s vaccine would keep me from having to live lying in a metal tube with only my head sticking out.

For a kid living in the shadow of polio and the omnipresent Cold War, hearing continuously that those evil Russians could at any time send those nasty missiles to our shores to blow us all to smithereens, scared the living crap outta me. It felt as though danger existed all around me. Even as a very young kid, after a possibly ill-chosen night of moviegoing dressed in my pajamas at the local drive-in, for years I stared up at any looming city building convinced that the Beast from 20,000 Fathoms was going to suddenly break through a brick wall and bury me alive in dust and rubble.

I hadn't lived with that early paranoid fear of our beautiful spinning planet coming to a violent and cataclysmic end in a long time—that is until March, 2020 when we all went into pandemic mode and I again began to wonder if our world was embarking on a real live version of *The Andromeda Strain*.

The thing that struck me was how calmly people tried to accept our situation, how desperately we all attempted to ignore the uncertainty and go on living as much of the same life as we had previously as our daily lives began to fall into clumsy new patterns. Except for the lack of toilet paper and wearing stifling hazmat suits after waiting in line outside Trader Joe's for 45 minutes, living in fear became quasi-routine and I did everything I could to starve it down.

In Lucy Kirkwood's 2018 Tony-nominated epic play *The Children*, now making its overdue LA debut at the Fountain, three old friends thrust together in the kitchen of a rural early-Martin McDonagh-style cottage on the east coast of England do their best to maintain such a normalcy, graciously offering day-old tea in a thermos and offhandedly turning on emergency battery-powered lights as the sun begins to set in an effort to save their small allotment of electricity.

The threesome exists with the same kind of lingering fear conjured by growing up in the 1950s in the shadow of The Bomb or more recently when we all dutifully locked ourselves away in our homes as the hospitals filled to overflowing with dying COVID patients. As they make polite though often conflicted and awkward catchup smalltalk about their lives, they work hard to avoid discussing the obviously bad parts: the severely compromised world outside the cottage reeling from an apocalyptic environmental accident sending a cloud of radiation to settle over their community like an enveloping shroud—and the equally virulent, exceptionally troubled history of their own long-interconnected personal relationship.

In this quiet, bucolic setting, the former colleagues know that just outside the door, potential disaster looms. Long married couple Hazel and Robin (Lily Knight and Ron Bottitta) have taken over the old cottage situated on the edge of what they call the Exclusion Zone after their farmhouse and its livestock were caught in the epicenter of an explosion at the local nuclear power plant and its resultant tsunami. Unexpectedly, after an absence of nearly four decades, their former professional associate and Robin's former girlfriend Rose (Elizabeth Elias Huffman) arrives as the door so suddenly that Hazel reflexively bashes her in the face, causing a nosebleed and staining her blouse.

Aside from the discomfort soon arising from Robin and Rose's personal history, something we soon learn was not abandoned 38 years earlier but thrived in secret for many years, there's the fact that all three of these tentative survivors were employed as nuclear physicists at the plant now sending deadly waves of radiation spreading out into the countryside and beyond. More than that, they were there at the inception of the plant and whether or not their work was responsible for the catastrophe now destroying the once-serene bucolic countryside around them is the elephant in the room.

Kirkwood is masterful at creating very real, very David Hare-ian dialogue and situations, giving the barest trace of expository information to keep us absorbed and guessing while also somehow almost making the scenes seem fluid when one of the sparing friends leaves the room allowing the two remaining characters to offer a tad more insight into what is going on between them.

This is surely the best play to which we've been treated since the world is slowly and tentatively reopening but frankly, without a director as perceptive and supportive as Simon Levy and cast as brilliant and professional as this trio, *The Children* could become almost as thick and toxic as the air

outside Robin and Hazel's cottage.

Bottitta gives the performance of his career as the conflicted Robin, perilously trying to decide where his affections lie and how they fuck with his life—or what's left of it—as he contemplates the relationship he shares with each woman. He shields the reality that the beloved cows he pretends to visit each day on their destroyed farm were dead and buried the second day after the disaster from his sentimental wife, something seemingly minor but which provides a significant clue about what he's also hiding: the fact that he's coughing up blood and that, when hit by Rose's Geiger counter, his body sounds off like a visit to a uranium mine.

Huffman provides a richly multilayered performance as Rose, bravely facing the world but soon making it abundantly clear how broken she is both physically and emotionally, and how steadfastly she intends to attempt righting the wrongs for which she believes she and her former coworkers might be at least partially responsible. Her loveless and unfulfilled life is evident, especially when discovering Robin and Hazel have four children, a detail he had kept from her during their many years of clandestine meetings, her unflinching love and passion for only him leaving her without offspring of her own.

Knight is the glue that holds this all together, infusing her Hazel with so many conflicting emotions that it's almost dizzying. As the fearful wife wavers from attempting to be the perfect hostess in the middle of all the trauma, this incredible 21st-century Giulietta Masina somehow arrestingly conveys Hazel's enormous but conflicted love and loyalty to both her husband and her old friend. As the character turns on a dime from sweet trod-upon little wifey to out-of-control banshee to occasionally tell either or both of them how much they are responsible for the upheaval, Knight gives a heartfelt performance that will linger for many moons to come.

Still, it's the three of these enormously gifted folks creating magic together under the patient and insightful leadership of Simon Levy that makes this production so enthralling. It's not easy for three actors to hold our attention through almost two hours of intermissionless talking, but Knight, Huffman, and Bottitta offer a textbook example of generous, giving, electrically charged acting at its best, bouncing off one another so brilliantly I bet one could return to this production again and again and see new and completely divergent sparks fly every time. If I were back teaching this semester, I'd be doing everything I could to get my classes to the Fountain to see what quintessential ensemble performance is all about.

Above the wonders of this presentation, however, simply *The Children* is the best new play to hit our poor maligned cultural desert oasis in a long time, introducing to our shores a new playwrighting voice in Lucy Kirkwood that could prove to rival some of the best and most appreciated theatrical wordsmiths of the last century.

THROUGH JAN. 23: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Av., LA. 323.663.1525 or fountaintheatre.com
