

'Where Trouble Sleeps' is playwriting at its best

In 1898, Mark Twain penned "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg," a brutal little dissembling of small town piety that reflected his own depression at not only the state of the world, but the disintegration of his own life and fortune.

Almost a century later, another Southern author, Clyde Edgerton, whose wit, humor and ability to capture dialect rivals Twain's, wrote "Where Trouble Sleeps," and now playwright Catherine Bush,

an equally adept storyteller, has brought the latter story to Barter's Stage II.

The setting is Listre, N.C., a town just barely large enough to warrant a flashing caution light. It is where the much-touted, but razor-thin façade of religion is the town's pride and joy. It is also where Train's Service Station, the only place in town that sells beer, is really the community's hub.

Oh, and yes, Train's is the home of Trouble, an aging bulldog.

Enter into this community one Jack Umstead, a good-look-

ing con artist who is running from the law in a stolen car and seeking somewhere to pull off his next heist. It doesn't take long for Umstead to begin peeling away the town's pious gilt – or, rather, to simply be the catalyst that enables the gilt to delaminate itself.

Sex, of course, has always been the devil's most reliable tool for discombobulating the religious and so it proves to be in "Where Trouble Sleeps."

Aleese Toomey (Ashley Champos) is so righteous that as the play opens she is showing her son the local prison's electric chair as a way of scaring him off "bad sin."

The good-looking stranger (Dan Folino) hasn't been in town long before she has her husband, Stephen (Matthew Torbett), sporting horns.

Also quickly bedded with Umstead is Cheryl Daniels (Kelli Winn), the local "white trash" waitress, so considered because her father is the town drunk and her little brother, Terry (Logan Fritz), hangs out at Train's Place watching people drink beer.

Cheryl is also the exciter of lust in Preacher Crenshaw (Michael Poisson), a lust that Umstead's conquest of Cheryl makes float to the surface.

Blake Redding (Ben Mackel),

Train Redding's (Ezra Colón) brother, is also sexually attracted to Umstead, an attraction that Train seems to have realized earlier, but, in the way of small town people, suspected but had never broached thinking it better to neither ask nor tell.

Dorothea Clark (Kristen Gehling) doesn't appear to be sexually involved with anybody, but she talks to "Jesus" through a locked door in the church.

Nathan Whitmer is young Harvey Toomey, Aleese's son, who learns to dispassionately kill chickens with a .410 shotgun under the tutelage of Bea Blaine (Evalyn Baron), the patently evil miser who hoards money and licorice.

And who, in the end, violently ends, with a 12-gauge shotgun, the seduction of Listre by the devil's good-looking emissary.

This is the Barter directing debut for Jasper McGruder, and it is quite an impressive one.

Together with Edgerton's original novel and Bush's magnificent adaptation, McGruder has fashioned a truly world-class production that is storytelling at its best.

Of necessity on such a small stage there is a bit of abstraction, but, by and large, this is straight-ahead drama that brings to mind such classics



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"Where Trouble Sleeps," adapted by Barter Theatre's Catherine Bush, is running on Stage II through Nov. 13.

as "Bus Stop" or the works of Tennessee Williams.

To its credit, "Where Trouble Sleeps" is not a vehicle for making fun of small town people or denigrating them; rather it seems to be far closer to a loving portrait of how we are.

Like the small town that it depicts, there is nothing blatantly open here, but it is still not a play that will be enjoyed by all, primarily because not everyone will have the ability

to absorb the many nuances of place and character.

I'd recommend it for mature teens, adults with open minds and those who can appreciate a great story told by skilled craftsmen.

It is especially appropriate for those who, like me, love to look beneath the gild to see the lily – or, more often – the common marigold just beneath.

For showtimes: (276) 628-3991 or www.bartertheatre.com.



THEATER REVIEW

ROBERT MCKINNEY
BARTER THEATRE
"WHERE TROUBLE SLEEPS"

Edgerton-inspired work set for the stage

Step back in time to Listre, N.C., an indiscreet small town, steeped in tradition and superstition, populated by some of the most eccentric characters you'll ever meet as Barter Theatre presents the world premiere, "Where Trouble Sleeps." It's a typical small town where everyone knows each other's secrets."

"Where Trouble Sleeps" is based on the book by North Carolinian Clyde Edgerton and adapted by Barter's Catherine Bush. It is another among a long list of world-premieres produced by the State Theatre of Virginia and among an even longer list of Appalachian themed pieces.

Listre is inhabited by an intriguing cast of characters. "From fistfights to friendship, grave digging to romance, and a gun-toting spinster to a weather-predicting dog, "Where Trouble Sleeps" has it all!" said young actor Matthew Torbett of the upcoming Barter Theatre production. Torbett plays Stephen Toomey in the play. Stephen's mother,

Alease (Ashley Campos), is determined to keep him on the straight and narrow with a visit to the electric chair. Evalyn Baron portrays Bea Blaine, a proprietor who will do anything to protect herself from thieves. Ezra Colón and Ben Mackel play Train and Blake Redding, brothers who own a garage serving the "sinful" drink, beer. Poor Mrs. Dorothea Clark (Kristen Gehling) has broken her ankle so she must live in her office at the church. She is quite all right with this arrangement because it puts her in an excellent position to meet Jesus. And she does. Young Cheryl Daniels (Kelli Winn) is looking for a way, any way, to get out of this one-light town, and Preacher Crenshaw, played by Michael Poisson, is too busy keeping sin out of everyone else's lives to think much about his own. Let sleeping dogs lie has taken on a whole new meaning in this town where Trouble the dog predicts the weather – literally and figuratively.

When a stranger (Dan Folino) comes to town and the dog goes inside to sleep, will the town weather the troublesome storm that's brewing? Jasper McGruder is making his Barter Theatre directorial debut with this show. McGruder has directed the Off-Broadway productions "Enough is Enough" and "Monk 'n' Bud." McGruder is also playing Noah "Horse" T. Simmons in "The Full Monty." "It is in this community, two young boys are attempting to understand their spirituality and reconcile the changes they will have to make in their lives to be able to enter the gates of Heaven. It is against this spiritual backdrop that this story unfolds," McGruder said. "Where Trouble Sleeps" gives us a look into the spiritual and moral fiber of this community. Think back when you were young and introduced to the concept of good and bad. As a youth there seemed to be a clear delineation all acts were one or the other; good stood a long way from bad. As an adult



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The townsfolk of Listre, N.C., are in for a surprise when a stranger arrives in Barter Theatre's world-premiere production of Clyde Edgerton's novel "Where Trouble Sleeps."

sometimes that gulf is not as distant," McGruder added. A story about faith and temptation, this play will uncover the truths of small town life and remind us that young or old, our

faith is challenged every day. For tickets and more information, call Barter Theatre's Box Office at 276.628.3991 or visit www.bartertheatre.com.