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## THEATER REVIEW

# 'The Serpent' tackles sins, consequences

By David C. Nichols  
Special to The Times

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The discoveries of the acting studio coil toward eternity in "The Serpent" at the Unknown Theater. This arresting barebones take on Jean-Claude van Itallie's Obie-winning experimental landmark exists in that realm where the theatrical and the sacred convene.

First performed in Rome in 1968, "The Serpent" was born out of collaboration with director Joseph Chaikin and his Open Theatre troupe. Its ceremonial trek starts in the lobby, where an elegant string arrangement of the Beatles' "Blackbird" heralds the actors, wearing gray sweats and an air of childlike anticipation.

They lead the processional to a curtain-swathed arena with chairs encircling a central field of black dirt. Percussive sounds and references to John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. slowly evolve into a nonlinear examination of the consequences of human choices.

Four female choristers (Kathy Bell Denton, Angela Stern, Brittany Slattery and Kelly Lett) launch an invocation of the existential whorl — "I no longer live in the beginning." As they establish their compass points, the Garden of Eden emerges. From here, "The Serpent" draws from the Book of Genesis, contemporary angst and kinetic craft with unerring simplicity.

Director-designer Chris Covics takes the minimalist principal to its zenith, especially his stark lighting plot, and the players have preternatural cohesion.

Alex Carver and Wallis Herst bring rapt intensity to Adam and Eve, while Mark Woods and Jeremy Guskin mime Cain and Abel with heart-stopping results. Ed Dyer, Ramy Eletreby, Kamil Haque and Diana Wyenn complete the indivisible company.

Peer too intently at "The Serpent" and you'll merely see a selfless ensemble seizing ritual space with absolute control. Sit back and let it wash over you, and Covics' intimate vision of Van Itallie's concept could infiltrate your dreams.

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'The Serpent'

**Where:** Unknown Theater, 1110 N. Seward St., L.A.

**When:** 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 6 p.m. Sundays

**Ends:** April 7

**Price:** \$18 to \$24

**Contact:** (323) 466-7781 or [www.unknowntheater.com](http://www.unknowntheater.com)

**Running time:** 1 hour, 30 minutes

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