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By Dave DePino

Jean-Claude van Itallie's 1968 ceremonially provocative parable of apples, serpents, and sibling rivalry could be a very iffy prospect. This rendering, however, seems to paint the van Itallie account as eloquent and nearly divine, honoring the Book of Genesis, but not without first offering pantomimed, present-day brain surgery — autopsies to be specific. It is the '60s, punctuated by the killings of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.

The huge stage is nearly taken up by a circle filled with 3,000 pounds of black dirt. Outlining the perimeter are wooden chairs of varying design, placed close together — seats for the audience. The cast of a dozen then arrives, trancelike, dressed in loose, colorless garb, the actors using their bodies to make low percussive sounds. The play commences to the song "Blackbird," and so begins man's loss of innocence, told with balladic simplicity. The players move to the center of the circle. By this time, we have become captivated.

Chris Covics helms the project with visionary style and emotional intensity; Dan Oliverio serves as assistant director. They not only dazzle us with their theatrical passion but also have placed us inside it — inside the ceremonial circle, or at least at its edges. It's not a remote thought that we are part of what's happening on the stage, just inches from the dirt at our feet.


The ensemble is superb. Its dedication to storytelling is mesmerizing. The temptation of Eve seems hauntingly real, and that of Adam, even more so. The discovery of the word "kill" and its meaning is heartbreaking as witnessed by the memorable portrayal of Cain and Abel. The costumes, the sound, the set décor — all perfectly fulfill a uniform vision.

Presented by and at Unknown Theater, 1110 N. Seward St., L.A. Thu.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 6 p.m. Mar. 9-Apr. 7. (323) 466-7781. www.unknowntheater.com.

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