



APRIL 5, 2009

- HOME
- POLITICS
- MEDIA
- BUSINESS
- ENTERTAINMENT
- LIVING
- STYLE
- GREEN
- WORLD
- CHICAGO
- COMEDY 23/6
- VIDEO
- BLOGGER INDEX
- ARCHIVE
- Twitter: Follow Us
- Get Email Alerts
- Make HuffPost Your HomePage



Madonna Jets Out Of Malawi



More in Entertainment: Farrah Hospitalized... Madonna Tot's Dad Found... Choreographer: Rapist?...



WATCH: SNL: Madonna And Angelina In Weekend Update Adoption-Off



Michael Giltz

Posted October 16, 2008 | 04:40 PM (EST)

- BIO
- Get Email Alerts
- Become a Fan
- Bloggers' Index

# Theater: Campbell Scott in "The Atheist" and Christine Lahti in "A Body Of Water"



Read More: [Campbell Scott](#), [Christine Lahti](#), [Theater](#), [Entertainment News](#)

**Buzz up!** Be the First to Submit This Story to Digg

Get Breaking News Alerts

never spam

Share Print Comments

Two terrific film stars are on the stage in New York, something neither of them do nearly enough. Like most of the best theater actors, both Campbell Scott and Christine Lahti have a piercing intelligence that keeps you on your toes.

## THE ATHEIST

Scott stars in the one-man show *The Atheist* by Ronan Noone (a playwright that's new to me) at the Barrow St. Theatre in New York. Augustine Early is a sleazy journalist (is that redundant?)

from a white trash background who is determined to make a name for himself one way or another. When he stumbles onto a would-be actress renting an apartment from a politician who secretly videotapes her sex-capades, Early couldn't be happier. Squeezing the politician for favors while planning to run the story anyway suits Early just fine. The role of an amoral climber suits Scott just fine, too. He commands the stage easily, drawing us in with the easy charm of someone you don't trust but can't help enjoy chatting with. Whether battling with an editor who is wedded to old-fashioned ideas of reporting or sparring with the politician over ethics, Early is compelling in a sneaky, better-not-turn-your-back-on-him manner.

The name of the show seems misleading. Early talks about losing his religion, but he certainly hasn't lost his faith: he firmly believes in rapaciously doing anything and everything to help himself. We get some religious trappings, like the moment Early lost his faith (though it really wasn't losing faith in God but losing faith in trusting others that changed him), not to mention the politician's wife, who is quite a turn-on, especially when she's sitting in church and trying to avoid Early's advances. Why not call the show "The Journalist" or "The Reporter?" It would take the weight off a story that really doesn't have issues of faith on its mind. That wouldn't make this familiar story of small-town corruption and small-time power-grabbing more original. But it would lower the pretension level that such a title raises.

## Popular Stories on HuffPost

- Fashion Face-Off! Michelle Obama And Carla Bruni-Sarkozy Finally Meet In France (VIDEO, PHOTOS, POLL)  
\*Video, poll and slideshow
- Levi Johnston Talks Safe Sex With Tyra Banks (VIDEO)  
\*\*\*UPDATE\*\*\* 8:30pm: People.com is reporting that Sarah Palin has issued...
- Oscar de la Renta Slams Michelle Obama's Buckingham Outfit As Major Designers Feel Ignored  
While Michelle Obama has made lesser...
- Verena von Pfetten 7 Lessons To Be Learned From Carla Bruni  
So here's the thing. There's no shortage of articles dedicated to that certain je ne...
- Huff TV Arianna Discusses Michelle Obama's "Fantastic" Style On CBS'

Scott has no pretension in him and turns this low-rent Woodward and Bernstein into a compelling character. He doesn't oversell Early's charm or his sleaze. Scott chose to keep Early on a short leash emotionally. It's only when he makes the mistake of opening himself up to feelings that Early explodes briefly in anger before reining himself back in.

Unfortunately, Scott is completely alone up there. I don't mean the fact that there are no other actors. I mean the fact that the production design and sound design and directing are all uniformly dull and unhelpful. The backdrop is a generic image (perhaps evoking a window and a tree branch; perhaps not). The random moments when Early's image is projected onto a screen and then multiplied again and again into the distance serve no purpose. The musical interludes between scenes are noir-ish jazz; those cues might become more frantic as the play progresses but in general any one of the cues could be switched with any other and no one would notice or care. And for a play that's only about 90 minutes long, an unnecessary intermission wastes everyone's time. Worst of all, the entire play is presented as a confession and the fears about the too-obvious direction Early is headed in prove well-founded. Right before the end, Early tells a very effective story about his mother that ends with a cold comment from her and Early daring the audience to feel sympathy for him -- the sharp silence that followed his story will be the memory of this play I walk away with. Too bad they didn't stop there; any good journalist knows you should end with a kicker.

What others are saying:

**The New York Times'** Charles Isherwood said: the show has "all the sting of a ten year old tabloid headline.... Under Justin Waldman's direction Mr. Scott's breezy conviction imbues the writing with a liveliness that holds the attention, but the inconsistencies and occasional absurdities pile up like the notebooks littering the floor of the set."

**Variety's** Sam Thielman said: "Noone's yarn gets better and better as it rockets along, especially with Campbell Scott to give the title character a well-placed jolt or two. As Augustine Early, a newspaper reporter swallowed whole by ambition, Scott has enough hypnotic charisma for about five actors, keeping the aud enthralled by Early's smooth-voiced, friendly facade and occasionally letting his barely controlled rage smash it to bits."

**The Associated Press'** Michael Kuchwara said: "Noone's writing has a rhythmic quality, call it a staccato lilt, that Scott captures with complete assurance. Nattily dressed in a light suit and tie, the actor resembles a fast-talking salesman, sort of a darker, nastier version of Professor Harold Hill of "Music Man" fame. And director Justin Waldman never lets the pace of the evening slacken, despite the play's two acts."

**Theatremania's** Barbara & Scott Siegel said: "If you see a better performance on a stage in New York City this year, it will have to surpass the extraordinary work by Campbell Scott in the one-person play *The Atheist*, a co-production of the Culture Project and Circle in the Square, now at the Barrow Street Theatre."

## A BODY OF WATER

Unlike Campbell Scott, Christine Lahti is not alone up there in **Lee Blessing's** *A Body Of Water at Primary Stages*. She's one of three actors, but I'm really referring to the technical aspects. The set is an hypnotic one, with a living room bordered on two sides by visions of a green countryside that are 3-D in their inviting beauty and a backdrop of a marvelous view of more greenery and the water (a lake? a river?) of the title. Along with the lighting and sound, it's all elegant and simple and vaguely mysterious, just like the story.

A description of the play sounds Brechtian or Pinter-esque. Two adults (Christine Lahti and Michael Christofer) wake up in a home with a wonderful view, seemingly cut off from the world. And they have no idea who either of them are (are they married? friends? siblings?) or what's going on. A young woman later appear (Laura Odeh) who provides them with a string of answers, seemingly whatever fits her mood or perhaps just what might appeal to the two people and keep them calm.

Happily, the show is not nearly so abstract. The two people are probably married and either they lost a daughter in a terrible crime or maybe the young woman is their daughter and maybe the wife tried to kill the husband for cheating on her emotionally (she may or may not have found a diary in

"Washington Unplugged"

Arianna was on CBS' "Washington..."

**Alex Leo** The "Real Housewives Of New York City" Flowchart Of Hate

I'm a little embarrassed to love this show as much as...

"BRUNO" TRAILER! Calamity, African Babies, Chase Scenes And More (NSFW VIDEO)

IT'S HERE! The trailer for this July's Sacha Baron Cohen...

**NATO Leaders Focus On Afghanistan, But Most Reject Obama's Plea For Troops (SLIDESHOW)**

STRASBOURG, France — On the eve of the NATO...

**First Lady Fashion At Friday's NATO Concert (PHOTOS)**

Another night, another fashion opportunity for NATO leaders and their spouses! See...

**Diana Palin, Sarah Palin's Sister-In-Law, Arrested For Breaking Into Home**

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Police say Alaska Gov....

**John Oliver Explains The Real Reason You Never Touch The Queen (VIDEO)**

John Oliver was upset enough to drop his monocle when he...

**Obama Teases Reporter From India During Press Conference (VIDEO)**

Obama held a conference packed with press from around the world on Thursday. He called...

**Jim Cramer Declares The Depression "Over" (VIDEO)**

On Thursday's episode of "Mad Money" host Jim Cramer declared that the depression...

**Scientists Find Rocket Fuel Chemical In Infant Formula**

ATLANTA — Traces of a chemical used in rocket fuel were found in samples of...

**Least Wasteful Cities In America (SLIDESHOW)**

It's great to love the city you live in, and better to

which he detailed her annoyances) or maybe it's something else entirely. And it seems quite clear that these two people wake up each morning and start all over again -- their memories are sieves, it seems, and even an hour or two can separate them from whatever facts they've learned or been told about themselves.

No, you don't get a lot of answers, but the show is so grounded and specific and engagingly performed that it seems less like an exercise in existentialism and more a genuine exploration of what it means to be happy. Can two people ever really know each other? What brought them to this point in their lives? Is joy meaningless or more real if we acknowledge how alone and yet interconnected we are? It's a credit to Blessing's play that we feel genuinely engaged with such abstract ideas. It's a modest, intriguing work. I think on a Broadway stage it would feel too blown up, too important and the weighty metaphysical ideas that are quietly present now would take over. As it is, in the intimate space of Primary Stages, the show has its ideal setting.

Odeh as the young woman is a bit mannered, but that works just fine for a character that may be a daughter forced to reenact the same wrenching details over and over again. I was a bit worried about Christofer, who is better known to me as a playwright (*The Shadow Box*) and film writer and director (*Gia*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*) than as an actor. But he is very good as Moss, the disheveled man who is invariably attracted to this compelling, beautiful, funny woman he's stranded with on an island of no memory.

And who can blame him? Lahti is effortless as Avis, a sexy, confident woman confronting the frightening circumstance she's found herself in. Early on, she and Moss are alone, trying to figure out if they know each other. He suggests they open their robes and look at each other's body -- maybe a birthmark or some such intimate detail will trigger something. Avis amiably distrusts him, but she's no prude and soon agrees. Moss opens his robe and she takes some tongs from the kitchen to move around his privates. After a moment, she says thoughtfully, "Just like a penis...only smaller" before he jumps away in annoyance and the audience laughs. The line is nothing special, but Lahti is so present in the moment, laughing so easily and without malice at her little joke that you can't help being won over. Whoever they may be, he's lucky to be trapped with her. Later, Lahti looks so terrific in a blue dress that you can't help feeling a little cheated in retrospect when she flashed him but kept her back to us. In every other respect, Lahti exposes herself fully with the talent and charm we've come to expect from the actor behind movies like *Swing Shift*, *Housekeeping*, *Running On Empty* and the late, lamented TV drama *Jack and Bobby*. Look at her credits and you can't help feeling she hasn't been given her due nearly enough in any medium -- not in the movies, on TV or onstage. Her character might forget herself, but we won't forget her - Lahti is too good for that to ever happen.

What others have said:

**The New York Times'** Charles Isherwood said: "This sputtering drama about a man and a woman who wake up one day with matching cases of amnesia is ultimately so, er, forgettable that its resolution ceases to be a matter of suspense long before it arrives.... Ms. Lahti gives a warm performance (she looks sensational too) and Mr. Cristofer an energetic one, but their characters never move beyond fussing over the oddity of their predicament to reveal distinct personalities."

**The Daily News'** Joe Dziemianowicz said: three stars out of five. "Staged by Maria Mileaf for Primary Stages, the production boasts a smooth flow, consistent tone and handsome design. A rainstorm seems so real you'll want to open an umbrella. Lahti, onstage after a 15-year gap, and Cristofer ("The Shadow Box") bring out the couple's confusion and wariness and are quite moving as they reach out to each other."

**Variety's** Sam Thielman said: "Blessing's script is unlikely to ruffle any feathers, but the central insights about intimacy are sneakily disturbing. The couple's rude awakening is an everyday occurrence (maybe), followed by an exploration of the Edenic world around them (possibly) that vanishes into the haze of forgetfulness as soon as they go to bed together in the evening, again for the first time (perhaps). Is the love that blossoms every day between Moss and Avis (convincingly played, especially by Lahti) the real thing, or is it simply better living through that initial chemistry?"

**Theatermania's** David Finkle said: "The Edenic view is represented by three huge and captivating Timothy Arzt paintings -- one upstage, one stage left, one stage right -- that look like something Henri Rousseau might have rendered as the 20th Century got underway. You look at it and wish



**HUFFPOST'S BIG NEWS PAGES**


[MORE BIG NEWS PAGES](#)

Books by this author

**This Blogger's Books from**

**A cabin of one's own: New England's MacDowell Colony celebrates 100 years of artistic utopia. And the gay and lesbian artists who prospered there celebrate ... (The national gay & lesbian newsmagazine)**  
by Michael Giltz

**Affairs to remember: Farley Granger bedded Ava Gardner, Shelley Winters, and Leonard Bernstein. In his autobiography, Include Me Out, Hitchcock's muse ... (The national gay & lesbian newsmagazine)**  
by Michael Giltz



you had a wall at home to accommodate at least one of the soothing works. The only trouble is they're forced to serve as backdrops to Blessing's maddeningly enigmatic 90-minute play."

More in Entertainment...

Reality Star Jade Goody Buried In Lavish...      Robert De Niro Nanny Sues For \$40,000      Demi Moore's Twitter-Based Suicide Intervention      Anti-Chris Brown Song Hits Radios

**digg™** HuffPost Stories Surging Right Now

[Michelle Obama's Clothing Has Sean Hannity All Out Of Sorts](#)

[RICHARD POPLAWSKI, Pittsburgh Gunman, Kills 3 Police Officers](#)

[Dr. Rachel Ehrenfeld: Does Iran Harbor Osama bin Laden?](#)

[John Demjanjuk, Ohio Man Accused Of Being Nazi Guard, Avoids Deportation](#)

Sponsored Links

The Most \$100K+ Jobs  
Search 72,384 Jobs that pay over \$100,000 at TheLadders.com.  
[www.TheLadders.com](http://www.TheLadders.com)

"My Teeth Are so White"  
Read the trick, discovered by a mom, to turn yellow teeth white.  
[CathysTeeth.com](http://CathysTeeth.com)

Arthritis Information  
Sign Up to Receive a Free Info Kit About Rheumatoid Arthritis.  
[www.RAStraightTalk.com](http://www.RAStraightTalk.com)

[Buy a link here](#)

**Comments** 0 Pending Comments 0

[FAQ: Comments & Moderation](#)   [FAQ: HuffPost Accounts](#)

Want to reply to a comment? Hint: Click "Reply" at the bottom of the comment; after being approved your comment will appear directly underneath the comment you replied to

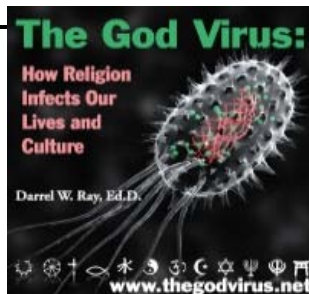
View Comments:    Newest    Expand  
                         First    All

Comments are closed for this entry

You must be [logged in](#) to reply to this comment. [Log in](#) or

Ads by Google

2008 "Editor's Choice"  
Blow Your Mind Not Your Budget Big Sound From Small Orb Speakers  
[www.OrbAudio.com](http://www.OrbAudio.com)



Google™ Custom Search

