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MAPLE AND VINE ** PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZON

Jordan Harrison's new play is very high concept, a sort of *Pleasantville* for real. You've heard of Civil War reenactments and maybe been to one of those tourist sites where actors pretend to be Pilgrims and answer questions about their daily routine.

In this comic drama, Harrison imagines a group of people who take this one step further: they create a gated community where everyone is committed to living back in 1955. Wives mostly stay at home and prepare meals, husbands go to work and have a few drinks after, the TV shows *I Love Lucy* on one of its three channels, racism and other prejudices are subtly back in style and so on. Why?

Why indeed. It doesn't take much thinking to realize that only very damaged people would want to escape to a "better" time in the past. Mind you, there is something to be said for repression and limits - primetime comedies are sometimes more sophisticated than cable versions because they can't simply show sex or curse freely and therefore must be more creative. The idea bubbling under *Maple and Vine* is that the repressions of the 1950s might serve a similar freeing purpose for our heroes.

We begin in the present -- wait, the whole show takes place in the present. We begin in the City where Katha (Marin Ireland) is sunk into a depression over a miscarriage and her husband Ryu (Peter Kim) finds his career as a plastic surgeon unsatisfying. The play spends ten or so tiresome minutes trying to convince us that these two would be open to uprooting their lives and joining a cult -- as Ryu puts it -- where they'd lose all contact with the outside world and be living in 1955.



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[Maple And Vine](#) would have been much better off beginning right away with the sales pitch by Dean (Trent Dawson) and Ellen (Jeanine Serralles). They have a lot of fun embodying 50s cliches with passion, from the right clothes to the right lingo (but not too much; don't overdo it, they caution). Besides, we never really buy the central conceit that our heroes would actually do this, especially since they're a mixed race couple and that raises all sorts of complicating issues.

The show develops a little interest when Katha -- now Kathy, no funky offbeat names in 1955, thank you very much -- blossoms as a housewife, Ryu finds the lowered expectations at his job a relief, and they encourage some subtle prejudice in order to spice up their experience. Further complications arise when we discover Dean is a homosexual. The Commies are presumably just around the corner though at *Maple and Vine* they're mostly present as a scare tactic rather than a real internal threat (just like in 1950s America)!

You need to upgrade your Adobe Flash Player to watch this video.
[Download it from Adobe.](#)

I want to praise Alexander Dodge's smart-looking set but I won't. I think perhaps the gorgeous new facilities and resources of Playwrights Horizons gave him too many toys to play with. The switches from one lovingly presented 50s household to another to the City to streets and so on are laboriously created by wheeling giant sets on and off the stage by a tireless crew (they even took a deserved bow). Worse is the factory floor where Ryu folds boxes. Nothing could be lower tech than that, but to get to the factory floor, Dodge raises up out of the floor a very elaborate metal-table/space with a hole for dumping boxes. They could have easily created the same setting far more easily with a simple wooden table at the front of the stage or some other low-tech idea.

Even more distracting are the giant visual banners hung above the City apartment and on the wall at the beginning of the show. They look like windshields during a rainstorm and it's hard to know if they serve any purpose other than to be distracting and hide the roof of the 1955 household that Katha and Ryu will occupy. In general, the set design involves an awful lot of heavy lifting for very little effect. The same is true of the show itself. Director Anne Kaufman keeps the material at hand delivered smoothly, though the elaborate set changes might have made her feel more like a traffic cop than director. Ilona Somogyi wisely avoids jokey outfits and keeps the 50s look spot-on in the costumes. David Weiner subtly uses the contrast between over-lit sets (for that sitcom feel) and more subtle lighting when deeper emotions arise and sound designer Bray Poor's work is invisible as it should be.

The actors struggle to get across the central conceit, especially our heroes. Ireland improves a bit as her character wakes up, though Kim never makes much impression. As mentioned, Dawson has more fun as the closeted Dean and Pedro Pascal is good in dual roles as his lover and an office worker in the City.

The show is almost worth seeing simply for the wonderfully amusing and rich performance of Serralles, who plays Ellen and an office worker in the City. She has somehow created a backstory for Ellen that is convincing and true to her and makes that character's commitment to 1955 both sad and very, very funny. She gets a laugh from shrugging her shoulder or just saying hello and then even manages to wring some emotion out of Ellen's predicament. Harrison's play may be flawed but the crazy concept gave Serralles enough material to craft a subtle, hilarious portrait of desperation. We already knew the vision of a rosy past was an illusion. But the future for Serralles just got brighter.

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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these shows with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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