

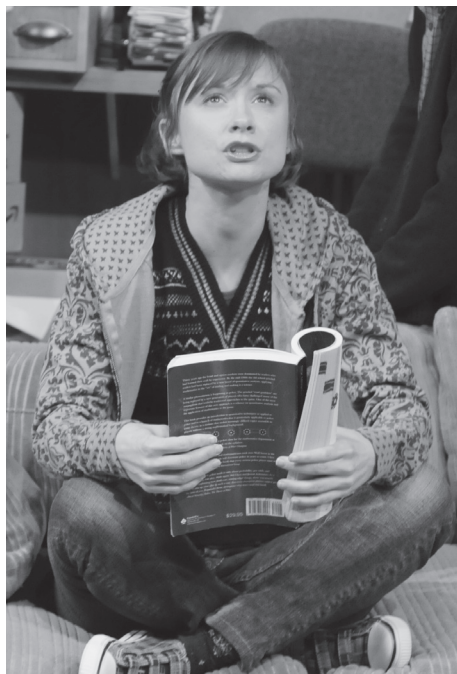
Carter W. Lewis' Vision of the American Teenager

Picasso had his “Blue Period.” Frank Lloyd Wright had his “Prairie Period.” Even Woody Allen had his recent “London Period.” And one could make the case that Carter W. Lewis is in his “Smart Kids Period.”

Exhibit A: *The Storytelling Ability of a Boy*. Dora and Peck, the teenagers at the center of Lewis' newest play, are wild, passionate, vulnerable and, on top of it all, unnervingly smart. Peck is the titular boy with a gift for storytelling, evident both in his written work and in the fantasies he conjures at the drop of a hat with Dora, his intellectual sparring

partner. Their intelligence is especially obvious when they match wits with teacher Caitlin, no dummy herself, but who has the unenviable task of trying to teach two students who seem to resent the implication that there are things they don't know yet.

Exhibit B: *Evie's Waltz*. This is the piece Lewis wrote just before *The Storytelling Ability of a Boy*, and the plays are clearly emotional and thematic cousins. Like *Storytelling*, *Evie's Waltz* is a three-hander with a deep interest in the lives of troubled but eloquent teenagers, and as in *Storytelling*, the threat of violence permeates the play. As 17-year-old Evie talks



Emily Zimmer in Florida Stage production of *Ordinary Nation*
Photo by Ken Jacques

to Danny's parents on their patio, Danny is perched in the nearby woods with a gun, communicating with Evie via text. Evie is trying to explain to Danny's parents some crucial reality of her and Danny's existence, but despite their best efforts, Danny's parents seem unable to grasp her point. It's a testament to the power and mystery that adults fear in even their own teenagers.

And Exhibit C: *Ordinary Nation*. Florida Stage audiences will remember this play and its whip-smart Frankie, a 15-year-old poker shark who held the adults around her morally accountable even as she herself skated (figuratively and literally) around the edges of thorny ethical dilemmas. With the clarity that often comes most readily from teenagers, Frankie tossed off quips like, "If

from *Ordinary Nation*

FRANKIE: And I know we're broke, and I get in trouble once in a while – but we're nice, right? Aren't we nice?... We care about things, ya know, don't we?

he or she [God] does exist and was listening to government-types using his/her name to claim the moral high ground, he/she would probably gag on his/her own sandals." *Ordinary Nation* was in many ways a gentler play than *The Storytelling Ability of a Boy* or *Evie's Waltz*, but Lewis' belief in the startling intelligence of American teenagers was every bit as evident.

Each one of these plays displays equal parts concern and hope for its young characters. Their unusual intelligence is a gift, but it is also a burden and, in the hands of people who are not yet emotionally mature, it has the potential to be a dangerous weapon. It has a palpable weight that Lewis' characters have to carry, but can also throw around.

from *Evie's Waltz*

EVIE: Maybe I'm just the "effect" that all you "causes" don't want to own up to?

There is ample evidence that this intelligence is not just a playwright's fiction, but a very real phenomenon. First, and most importantly, Lewis has a lot of credibility on the issue; he spends a big part of his life working with America's youth as the Playwright-in-Residence at Washington University. There is also the Flynn Effect, which shows that the average IQ in the world has been rising an average of three points a decade since the beginning of the Twentieth Century. A number of key

statistics – including school violence, drug use and pregnancy rates – are dropping, indicating that teenagers are making better decisions. And, of course, they have an unprecedented access to instantaneous information – of all kinds – on their computers and phones.

Yes, the teenagers in *The Storytelling Ability of a Boy* are smarter than the average teenager. As are the young characters in *Evie's Waltz* and *Ordinary Nation*. But they are also still vulnerable, still volatile, still fragile and still fierce. In a word: they're still teenagers.

-Jonathan Wemette

from *Evie's Waltz*

CLAY: He's sixteen.

GLORIA: So he should know better.

CLAY: He's young; sixteen licenses him to not know better.

For more information about *The Storytelling Ability of a Boy*, including videos, pictures, links and more, visit Florida Stage's *FurtherMore* at www.floridastage.org/furthermore



Magan Wiles in St. Louis Repertory Theatre's production of *Evie's Waltz*
Photo courtesy The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis/Jerry Naunheim, Jr.)