

THE *Current*

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Tom Jacobs

An intense thriller with feminist overtones

The setting is the Wallowa Mountains of remote eastern Oregon. It is winter. A female forest ranger on patrol comes upon what appears to be a deserted house.

The door is open. The lights are on. And the snow outside is spattered with blood.

It sounds like the opening of a dark HBO miniseries. But it's actually the first scene of E.M. Lewis's "Strange Birds," [a new play being staged](#) Feb. 20 through March 1 at UC Santa Barbara.

"It's an intense little story," [Lewis](#) said in a telephone interview from the family farm in Oregon where she makes her home. "The characters are five women and a wolf. It's kind of a feminist thriller."

"It's unlike anything we've done before," added director [Risa Brainin, a professor in UCSB's Department of Theater and Dance](#) and artistic director of LAUNCH PAD, the department's new-play development series. "Strange Birds" is the latest play in that 20-year-old endeavor, which Brainin inaugurated in the spring of 2005.

Like all plays in [the unique LAUNCH PAD series](#), "Strange Birds" is a work-in-progress that has been given a full production. Lewis will be on hand for the run and will have the chance to make changes from one performance to the next. The hope is, by the end of the run, the play will be in its final form and ready for a fully professional

premiere.

“A playwright doesn’t understand what a play really is until it’s on its feet,” Lewis said. “It has to have its design elements in place, and the actors in it. It also has to include the audience — to see how they are receiving the story. It’s so rare to be able to tweak the play under those circumstances!”

Lewis, 53, met Brainin about a decade ago, when two of her works were included in the annual PlayFest Santa Barbara. Brainin saw them, was impressed, and kept Lewis in mind as a potential collaborator.

“About a year and a half ago, Risa reached out and said she was looking for pieces for Summer LAUNCH PAD, which allows three playwrights to develop new work,” Lewis said. “Her timing was wonderful: I happened to have the beginning of a new play — a fragment — really I wrote a good portion of the play that week.”

“What I was most excited about was the students’ reaction,” Brainin recalled. “They loved this piece! In fact, a couple of the actors who took part in the workshop are also in this production.”

What touched the young actors so deeply? “It’s a play about women,” Brainin said. “It deals with domestic violence, and also sisterhood — what it means to support each other in a moment of crisis. The material requires the actors to go to some dark places.”

And to ask some fraught questions.

“I think the stage is a really good place to grapple with ethics,” said Lewis. “The characters have to figure out what’s right, who is important to them and what they are willing to do for the people who matter to them.”

Lewis often addresses sociopolitical issues in her writing. Her most-produced play is “The Gun Show,” which she describes as “a one-person show about guns and gun violence in America.” It has had more than 50 productions across the country, and also had a full run at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

But she isn’t at all interested in preaching to her audience.

“I write about things that upset me, make me angry and sometimes that delight me,” she said. “The big questions I have as a human being ultimately become the core of many of my plays. These are questions I don’t have an answer to. If I go in knowing the answer, I can write an essay. But if there’s a deep question I can’t answer, I resort to my characters to help me figure it out.

“I want my characters to be as complex and messy as any human being I know and love. If I’m truly allowing them to voice their concerns, rather than using them as puppets (for my own viewpoint), that will keep it real. They say what they want to say. I follow where they take me.”

Lewis’s journey from farm kid to playwright began, in a sense, at the library.

“I have always loved stories,” she said. “I’m the daughter of two elementary-school teachers. They valued books, and made sure I had a library card in my hand when I was a very little girl. I was one of those kids who would check out the maximum number of books every week, which was 14. Very early I was also writing stories and poems.”

It wasn’t until graduate school at the University of Southern California that she settled on playwriting. Specifically, when she took a dramatic writing class taught by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paul Zindel.

“It was eye-opening,” she said. “I realized that’s what I wanted to do with my life. I’ve been doing it ever since. I’m very lucky to have been able to build a life as a playwright, opera librettist and occasional teacher.”

That last vocation indirectly led to the creation of “Strange Birds.”

“It was inspired when I did a five-week writing and teaching residency with a group called Fishtrap in the Wallowa Mountains,” she said. “It’s beautiful, rough country. Deer would look in the window of my little cottage, watching me. It felt like an amazing place to set a story.”

The play also allowed Lewis to fulfill a long-sought goal. “I have long wanted to write a play with all women,” she said. “There are so many stories that are made up entirely of men, or where men are the only characters with agency. I wanted to balance that scale a bit.”

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