

Cultural Daily

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Final Apple Zoom Play *Incidental Moments* Celebrates Small Joys

David Sheward · Wednesday, September 16th, 2020

Dr. Anthony Fauci recently predicted we may not be able to sit safely in theaters until the end of 2021. If that is the case, we'll have to make due with the new hybrid form of theater, the Zoom play of which Richard Nelson has become the main practitioner. His latest piece *Incidental Moments of the Day: The Apple Family: Life on Zoom* is his deepest and most profound of a Zoom trilogy, examining the impact of national social currents without descending into political propaganda or overt symbolism. We are listening in on the achingly real dialogue of believable people wrestling with the overwhelming polarization of their country, with no concrete solutions, only questions and anxiety.



(Clockwise from upper left) Jay O. Sanders, Maryann Plunkett, Sally Murphy, Charlotte Bydwell, and Stephen Kunken in *Incidental Moments of the Day: The Apple Family: Life on Zoom*.

Credit: Jason Ardizzzone-West

Back in the spring when the COVID-19 pandemic forced us all inside, Nelson began chronicling the digital travails of his Apple family with *What Do We Need to Talk About?* and continued in July with *And So We Come Forth*. These four adult siblings and the boyfriend of one sister from the upstate NY village of Rhinebeck were first brought to life in 2010 on the Public Theater stage in four revealing, insightful pieces. Each was set in real time during a day of political significance (a primary or national election, the anniversary of 9/11 and the Kennedy assassination). Nelson also gave us three plays about the neighboring Gabriels and one about the Michaels. The latter two clans are brought into the mix in this current Apple Zoom play, available on YouTube through Nov. 5. (One character from the Gabriels is mentioned and another from the Michaels makes an appearance.)

As with the previous works in the cycle, there is not too much in the way of plot, but larger issues are discussed and the mood of the country is subtly dissected. The characters reveal their uncertainty, sorrow, and trepidation about the precarious future through Nelson's indirect dialogue and the voluminous unspoken subtext brought out by the sensitive acting of the ensemble.

The time is early September and the Apples are beginning to move out of their quarantine and into a new normal. Marian is out on a date, her first time at a restaurant since the pandemic began. In the last play she mourned not having touched another human for months. Jane and her partner Tim are at an impasse in their relationship as Tim now has custody of his teenage daughter from a

previous marriage and her displaced friend. Brother and sister Richard and Barbara have been living together while he has been searching for a new home after his divorce and she has been recovering from COVID. But now Richard has found a new girlfriend along with a house of his own. Barbara fears her connection to her brother, the closest one in her life, will suffer, and she will be truly alone.



Maryann Plunkett and Sally Murphy in *Incidental Moments of the Day*.

Credit: Jason Ardizzzone-West

These are the undercurrents coursing through the dialogue as the family takes on the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement, racial reckoning, historical parallels with the current election (Trump is only given a cursory mention), and the importance of small joys and large art in our every day lives. These last two strains come together as Tim describes an art exhibition depicting the ordinary moments of life and a journal left by his mother describing the seemingly mundane events of her day as she gradually succumbs to senility. The art and journal entries record the beauty of the ordinary which the Apples are striving to celebrate. Art is also celebrated by a surprise visit from Lucy, a character from *The Michaels* and former high school student of Barbara's. Lucy is on a dance fellowship in France, and performs via Zoom, the quirky piece she did in her play. Set to Scott Joplin's jaunty rag music, the short work is a burst of eccentric joy, defying the confines of the tiny computer screen, performed with wit by Charlotte Bydwell.

The company have played their characters in various incarnations, some dating back to the first Apple play in 2010, and they have perfected conveying the unspoken tensions within the family. Maryann Plunkett's Barbara and Sally Murphy's Jane are particularly sensitive in their pauses and hesitations, expressing the sisters' fear and insecurities through side glances and interrupted sentences. Jay O. Sanders' Richard and Stephen Kunken's Tim subtly search for connection as does Laila Robbins who appears briefly as Marian at the play's end.

Incidental Moments is billed as the last play in Nelson's Zoom series, but hopefully we will see more of the Apples. We will especially need them if Dr. Fauci's grim prognostication comes true.

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