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Theater Reviews: *The Wake* in Culver City, *Lascivious Something* [Inside] the Ford



Heidi Schreck and Emily Donahoe in *The Wake* at the Center Theatre Group/Kirk Douglas Theatre | Photo: Craig Schwartz by Lyle Zimskind for LAist

Two different plays that opened their world premiere runs in Los Angeles this past weekend both begin with the news that a Republican is about to become president. In [Sheila Callaghan's *Lascivious Something*](#) a young Greek woman tells her American expatriate husband that the radio is reporting Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 election; [Lisa Kron's *The Wake*](#) starts 20 years later, with the denizens of a New York City apartment transfixed by TV coverage of the post-election recount shenanigans that were about to culminate in G.W. Bush's White House ascendancy. In each of these works the impending political transition functions as a kind of metaphor for the correction of a long-standing wrong in their protagonists' lives, an emergence into brightness after years of aimless, dark confusion.

Just kidding, of course. Actually, Kron and Callaghan both use these respective elections to signal that the lives of their lead characters are about to be unsettled, gratifying their audiences' shared conviction that the rightward pendulum swings in living memory meant dark times ahead for everybody. In *The Wake* politics remains central to the play's events, as the earnestly activist Ellen (played by Heidi Schreck)'s committed social righteousness blinds her to the distress that her blithe personal self-absorption causes her loved ones throughout the W presidential era. The Age of Reagan's onset in *Lascivious Something*, by contrast, is significant mainly for the angst it causes August (Silas Weir Mitchell), now a Greek island innkeeper and winemaker with a much younger wife (Olivia Henry), whose idyllic existence is challenged by the surprise arrival of an old flame (Alina Phelan) from his '60s California radical days.

The Wake is a very New York-y play, set mostly in the small East Village walk-up apartment of Ellen and her longtime boyfriend Danny (Carson Elrod), with Danny's sister Kayla (Andrea Frankle) and

Kayla's wife Laurie (Danielle Skraastad) living in the same building to form a close and largely happy two-couple extended family household. Confident in the security of her domestic surroundings, Ellen allows herself to be seduced by Amy (Emily Donahoe), a childhood acquaintance now living in Boston, where Ellen begins traveling every other weekend to maintain an ongoing second romantic relationship. Not wishing to inhibit Ellen's freedom of self-discovery, Danny and Amy both tolerate this arrangement and indulge Ellen's bifurcated amorous inclinations. Until, after a few years, one of them finally issues an ultimatum. As the play moves along, images of topical newspaper headlines (9/11, the Iraq War, Katrina) and political news footage (Bush, Rumsfeld, Kerry) projected between scenes emphasize the tumult of the times and Ellen's own comically emphatic American liberal seriousness.



Alina Phelan and Silas Weir Mitchell in Lascivious Something at [Inside] the Ford.

Eschewing the straightforward kitchen-sinkish realism that characterizes most of *The Wake*, Callaghan's *Lascivious Something* heightens the enchantment of the play's isolated rustic vineyard milieu by playing around with the passage of time itself in the action's unfolding. At several points when the characters' passions are inflamed to the point of irredeemable confrontation, the scene suddenly - and shockingly - rewinds to an earlier moment, before the tension had mounted, and proceeds forward again in a less violent direction. Eventually, though, the obvious conflicts simmering beneath the surface niceties that they all exchange become too strong for the demands, or the unbearable revelations, that they end up unloading on each other to be reversed

Both of these productions are enhanced by uniformly fine ensemble acting in difficult roles and picture-perfect set and lighting designs. *The Wake* is especially enjoyable, too, for the crispness of its dialogue, while *Lascivious Something* exudes a haunting exoticism bordering on the magical. Still, one wonders why playwrights like Kron and Callaghan so often seem compelled to coat their perfectly compelling human dramas with the sheen of gratuitously popular politics.

The Wake, directed by Leigh Silverman, is running Tuesday through Sunday evenings, with Saturday and Sunday matinees, through April 18 at the [Kirk Douglas Theater](#) in Culver City. Tickets cost \$20 - \$45.

Lascivious Something, directed by Paul Willis, plays Thursday through Sunday evenings, plus Sunday matinees, [\[Inside\] the Ford Amphitheatre](#) through May 1. Tickets available for \$12 at [lastagealliance.com](#), \$13.50 at [goldstar.com](#), or \$20 via the Ford Theatres box office. Sunday matinee performances are "pay what you can."