

HEATHEN VALLEY

By Travis Michael Holder

Publication: [Back Stage West](#)

Date: [Thursday, September 9 2004](#)

Romulus Linney's stage adaptation of his 1962 novel is almost story [theatre](#), with a wide-eyed schoolboy named Billy narrating from his sufficiently inculpable point of view. This makes for a quintessential ensemble piece: Characters flow through time as they relate the tale of a remote Appalachian valley in 1860, a place where brothers marry sisters and the illiterate mountain folk live barren lives steeped in violence, superstition, and poverty. Into this wasteland comes a Bishop (Edwin Craig), who envisions the conversion of the entire godless population to that old-time religion. He enlists a native of the valley named Starns (Noah Harpster) and the orphaned Billy (Oren Skoog) to guide him to his purloined flock of hijacked hillbillies.

Harpster's performance is valiant and vulnerable, as Starns becomes a deacon of a church whose teachings he barely comprehends. "Poor folks has poor ways" is his mantra, and he knows the rest is so much lip service, except for the money the Bishop provides to create a communal farm. With freshness and riveting honesty, Skoog is the playwright's anchor, weaving the story's details together with a keen understanding for Linney's homespun [poetry](#). Keith Baker is also dynamic as the resident inbred nutcase, nicely complimented by Angela Allgood as the mother of his baby. As local midwife Juba, bridge between the old ways and the new, Leigh Rose is suitably severe and uncomplicated, but she is somewhat done in by a fight for lines, which takes her right out of the story. Craig, however, not only repeatedly fumbles lines but also brings none of the humanity necessary to make the Bishop's downfall a vital component. Just for starters, he'd be much more effective if he related to the other [actors](#) and not proclaimed all his speeches grandly out over the audience's heads.

Played on a blank stage with one wooden crate becoming everything from a crib to a pulpit, this could be deadly in the wrong hands. Here it is made remarkable thanks to Darin Anthony's fluid direction and some heartfelt performances, particularly Harpster and Skoog, who together breathe magical life into *Heathen Valley*.

"*Heathen Valley*," presented by and at the Elephant Asylum Theatre, 6322 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. Wed.-Sat. 8 p.m. Aug. 24-Sept. 11. \$17. (310) 453-5716.