



DYSFUNCTION JUNCTION : (left to right) Gordon Clapp, Ethan Hawke & Ann Dowd in *Blood From a Stone*. Photo: Monique Carboni

*Theater Review*

*Blood From a Stone*

# is a dysfunctional family affair

*Blood From a Stone*

By Tommy Nohilly

Directed by Scott Elliott

Through February 19, 2011

The New Group @ Theatre Row

Acorn Theatre

410 West 42nd St.

(212-239-6200), [www.thenewgroup.org](http://www.thenewgroup.org)



By Scott Harrah

At times, Tommy Nohilly's drama *Blood From a Stone* is as epic and riveting as such recent 21st century American classics as Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County*. Like the aforementioned play, *Blood From a Stone* chronicles the disintegration of an American family and its multiple dysfunctions. It also showcases some dynamic acting, particularly from star Ethan Hawke (giving one of the finest performances of his career), but the storyline's nonstop crises often bog down the narrative with mawkish melodrama. In addition, director Scott Elliott really needs to reel in the over-the-top performance of Ann Dowd, who is effective but often too shrill as the harridan-like mother, Margaret (not exactly a likable character).

Set in a working-class Connecticut town during a cold, rainy December, Travis (Hawke) is a pill-popping ex-Marine who has just returned from New York and plans to relocate to California (seeking, like U2's Bono once did, the spiritual healing power of those ever-appealing Joshua trees). He listens intently as his mother brays and bellows endlessly about her long-since doomed marriage to Bill ("NYPD Blue" star Gordon Clapp) and how the family home is falling apart, both literally and figuratively. Fortunately, despite such grim subject matter, the story is intense and engrossing, and there is simply no time for anything to get dull because so much is going on—perhaps a bit *too* much. A leaky roof, a lost cat, the troubled marriage of Travis's younger brother Matt (Thomas Guiry), the father's extramarital hijinks, and the alleged drug dealers next door all add up to far too much grief for audiences to process all at once. Still, it is all quite intriguing, and Ethan Hawke is consistently natural and engaging as Travis, a man who, although is lost, seems more together than his shrieking mother, construction worker father, overworked RN sister Sarah (Natasha Lyonne), and his conniving brother with a dark secret.

With the exception of Travis, many of the characters lack depth, and there is too little exposition for us to really know the author's intent. Well-crafted drama shouldn't leave too many questions for audiences to try and figure out. For example, father Bill talks about why his marriage has been rocky for

so many years, saying his wife "knows why," but we do not, and it is frustrating trying to fill in the play's numerous blanks.

There is plenty of genuine talent onstage, but the gifts of such actors as Ms. Lyonne and Daphne Rubin-Vega as neighbor Yvette, Travis's former girlfriend (who, though married, resumes physical passions with him), are underutilized. This makes these otherwise compelling characters seem almost unnecessary in a tale that is already overly busy and jam-packed with emotional wreckage. The characters utter a barrage of four-letter expletives incessantly, which may seem realistic on the surface, but overall the dialogue lacks the humor and crispness needed to bring levity to the often heavy-handed scenes.

Playwright Nohilly has much to say about the machinations of family interaction and the wounds of years of squabbling and discord that never exactly heal. With some careful tweaking of the script, and more meticulous direction, *Blood From a Stone* would have been a more polished, satisfying evening of theater.

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