

apples

by dermot **O**'sullivan

WHY I LIKE IT: Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...

Before I lay out why you should read Apples by Dermot O'Sullivan (and suggest you don't stop with reading but look into staging it. It's a PLAY for godsake), let me just say that it's terrific. Right up my ally, this absurdist play isn't exactly absurd as much as it is abstracted. It isn't all that abstract, either, at least not in a way that obscures the hyper-realness of the interchange between X and Y, two "genderless and ageless" characters who have an unusual way of expressing their intimacy and their angst – with an apple. Sometimes the apple is a focal point. Sometimes it's a distraction. Sometimes we forget about it entirely when the conversation goes on to other things, such as unenjoyable sexual encounters, or Y's night out with Caroline and how she threw up copious amounts of red wine. But whether the apple is hidden in a pocket or out in the open, it doesn't go away. The apple is every association that could be made about apples. It's the forbidden fruit. It's the familiar fruit. It's the thrill of the chase. It's a source of frustration. It's sexual energy. It's regret. It's sadomasochism. It's the quotidian. It's you and me and us. This is a near-perfect black box production. It exists in its own time/space continuum. It's thoughtful and moving. And whether it's about apples or not, it's good theatre. Note to future producers: Spring for the honeycrisps.

Five Stars/Five Apples

Here's a taste:

X: I like apples.

Y: What?

X: I like apples.

Y: Sure. Why's that?

X: Because I don't always like them. I just eat them every day. It's a practice. I eat one every day. Sometimes they're sour or too watery or dry as dust. But sometimes they're juicy and crunchy and just delicious. And that's why I eat them every day, because sometimes they're delicious. (pause) And then sometimes they're not...(Spacing is playwright's own.)

Apples

Characters

X

Y

Ideally both genderless and ageless.

Bare stage, except for two square boxes and one larger rectangular box, all three black. The rectangular box is centre stage, the square boxes are on either side of it. The stage area is black in colour, rather dark too I imagine. The characters are probably dressed in identical black, tight-fitting clothing. Potentially, they could also wear black gloves.

X enters holding a red apple. X does not take eyes off the apple in hand as walks to the centre of the stage where continues to marvel at the apple. Y enters and approaches X, speeding up considerably when sees the apple.

Y: *(making a grab for the apple)* Give me!

X: *(swinging away)* No!

Pause, both motionless, X with back to Y staring at the apple, Y staring sadly at X's back.

Y, eyes to the ground, moves slowly away from X and sits on one of the square boxes. Y stares at X's back again once seated.

Y: So, what's up?

X: *(glances around at Y quickly and then returns eyes to the apple. X's eyes remain on the apple during the following exchange)* Not much. What's up with you?

Y: Nothing much. *(Yawns)* I just woke up.

X: I've been awake for a while now.

Silence.

Y: So...

X: So?

Y: So did you hear about Caroline?

X: What about Caroline?

Y: Last night, Caroline, she did things.

X: What kind of things?

Y: Many things. I was with her. I could tell you about them.

X: You *want* to tell me about them.

Y: You want to hear them.

X looks around at Y quickly and then returns eyes to the apple.

Y: I could tell you about them.

X shifts on the spot but does not respond.

Y: I could tell you about them right now.

X begins to pace nervously, eyes still on the apple.

Y: We went out to town, to a nightclub, the music was loud and there were other people there...

X continues to pace for a short while after Y falls into silence. Then stops and looks at Y.

X: And?

Y: And?

X: And what happened?

Y: I forget now maybe. (*pause*) Where did you get that?

X: What?

Y: (*pointing at the apple*) That.

X: (*looks down at the apple*) I've always had it. Where did you get that?

Y: What? I don't have anything.

X: That (*points with free hand*), what you're sitting on.

Y: (*looks down at the box*) It was already here.

X starts to pace again, eyes on the apple. After a while Y speaks again.

Y: There's one for you too, a place to sit I mean.

X: (*stops*) Where?

Y: Just there.

X: Where? Tell me.

Y: (*pointing to the other square box*) There.

X sees the other box and walks over to it and sits down.

X: Thanks.

Long silence.

Y: Let me hold it.

X: (*eyes always on the apple*) No. It's mine.

Y: But I want it. Just for a bit. While I tell you about Caroline.

X: No, you'll eat it.

Y: (*scandalised*) I won't eat it!

X: You might.

Y: I promise.

X: Drop it.

Y: Okay, I'm sorry.

Long silence.

Y: (*conciliatory*) So how was your night?

X: Fine.

Y: What did you do?

X: Oh, many things.

Y: Anything to tell me?

X: Maybe.

Y: What?

X: I slept with someone.

Y: Really?

X: Maybe.

Y: Tell me.

X: *(looks up from the apple and keeps eyes on Y as speaks)* I was dancing alone and then I saw a person. The music was loud and I was dancing badly, but there was a connection, one of those connections that happen in those places in the dark. I danced into the person and we kissed and held each other and later went to my place and had sex and didn't enjoy it.

Y: *(raising hand)* High five!

X, *smiling, raises hand in response and Y simulates a smacking noise with mouth.*

Y: How many is that?

X: Seventeen this week.

Y: *(pointing at self)* Twenty eight this week.

X *raises hand, Y reciprocates and X simulates smacking noise with mouth.*

Silence.

Y: So...

X: So?

Y: How long have we known each other?

X: I don't know. Years?

Y: At least years...

Silence. X begins to toss the apple in the air with one hand and catch it with the same hand. Y ignores this and looks out towards the audience. Eventually, X lets the apple slip to the

ground and immediately both scramble for the apple, which X regains. They then both sit back down as they were before and X begins to toss the apple as before. Eventually, X stops and offers the apple to Y. (From this point on X's eyes are generally not on the apple, unless otherwise stated.)

X: You want it for a bit?

Y: (*without looking over*) No, I'm too tired now. Maybe later.

X: Okay, just let me know.

Y: (*looks over at X*) I will.

Pause.

X: So tell me about Caroline.

Y: She drank too much.

X: How much?

Y: Five bottles of wine.

X: That's not so much.

Y: Of course it is, if you haven't had any breakfast.

X: Okay, go on.

Y: Then she got sick.

X: And?

Y: It was in the club. I handed her an empty pint glass and she vomited red wine into it up to the brim. Then she placed it on the table without spilling a drop. I handed her another empty glass and she filled that one up too. And so on, until she'd filled up five pint glasses, all in a row on the table. They still tasted mostly of wine.

X: And?

Y: And she tried to sell them.

X: But?

Y: But I wouldn't let her.

X: Why?

Y: Because she was talking about you and I didn't like that.

Pause.

Y: She wants to own you.

X: I barely see her.

Y: I mean she wants to own you when she talks about you, she talks about you in that kind of way.

X: So what?

Y: (*standing up*) So I don't like it.

X: Sorry I asked.

Y: What does that mean?

X: I'm sorry I asked, it means I'm sorry I have to know things like this about you.

Y: Why are you like this?

X does not respond.

Y: Why are you like this?

X: Because I need to be.

Y: Why? Answer!

X: (*taking bitter pleasure*) Because I look at you and I see you and I just don't care. You try to make me care. It annoys me.

Y: I take your bullshit. (*shouting*) I take your bullshit! I take it! And I never complain.

Short silence.

X: Okay, go on. Do you want to tell me more about Caroline so you can tell me more about yourself?

Y: It's not as simple as that.

Silence.

Y: (*eyes on the apple*) Give it to me.

X: Not now.

Y: Give me something then, anything, your hat.

X: I don't have a hat.

Y: You have a hat, somewhere, in your pocket maybe, check in your pocket.

X: I don't have a pocket.

Y: (*lets out a little furious yelp*) Why are you always like this?

X does not respond.

Y: Why are you always like this?

X: (*annoyed and defiant*) Look, I don't need to do anything. I'm over here and you're over there. Let's keep it that way. And sit down, you're making me nervous.

Y sits down. Long silence.

X: We can talk though if you want. I don't mind talking.

Y: I don't want to talk anymore.

X: Of course you do.

Y does not respond.

X: Do you need me to coax it out of you? Is that it?

Y does not respond.

X: Okay, let's go: so what happened after? With Caroline I mean.

Y still does not respond.

X: Oh go on, tell me. I want to know.

Y: Nothing much.

Silence.

X: Look, you annoyed me a little. I got angry. I'm sorry. No need to sulk. You know we're friends.

Y: Yes, but it's hard.

X: It's hard for me too.

Y: (*after pause*) I know.

Pause.

X: So, tell me. Five pints of red wine and stomach acid on the table. Caroline is starting to feel better. And then you meet this person...

Y: No, that's not what happened. I met no one. *You* met someone last night. I met no one. I stayed with Caroline the whole night just to hear her talk about you.

X: *(standing)* For fuck sake! *(offering the apple)* Take the fucking thing! *(walks over to Y, arm thrust out offering the apple)* Take it! Take the fucking thing!

Y: *(looking away from X)* I don't want it.

X shoves apple aggressively towards Y's face.

Y: *(standing up)* I don't fucking want it!

Y turns back on X and walks away from X. X follows, arm out, repeating again and again: "Take it, take it, take it". They circle the stage like this for a short while and then X falls silent and they both sit down on their respective boxes again. X puts the apple in pocket. Very long silence.

Y: *(upset)* Let's be another way. This isn't fun.

X: *(pleasantly)* Agreed.

Pause.

Y: Tell me about your night.

X: No. *(then smiling at Y)* Let's sit together.

Y: Where?

X: *(gesturing towards the rectangular box with head, still smiling)* Over there.

Y: *(looks over at the big box and then smiles at X)* I'd like that.

They both go over to the big box and sit down on it, straddling the box and facing each other. They smile at each other for a long time.

X: I don't know what to say.

Y: Me neither.

Pause.

X: I know!

X takes the apple out of pocket and rolls it across the box towards Y. Y stops it with hands and rolls it back. They do this several times gently, smiling. Then they speed up and become more and more excited, but complicit, not in competition. (If the apple falls, one just picks it up eagerly and they continue as before.) Eventually X takes the apple in hand and they pause, both preferably panting.

X: (smiling at Y and aiming the apple at Y's crotch and swinging arm as if in preparation to throw. Y blocks reflexively) Put your hands behind your head.

Y: (with a smiling whimper) Nooo.

X: (still smiling) Go on.

Y: It'll hurt.

X: (sincere) I promise I won't hurt you.

Y looks warily at X and then puts hands behind head. X makes ready to roll the apple across the box towards Y's crotch area. Y grimaces in anticipation. X rolls the apple across, but gently, so it rolls gently against Y's crotch and comes to rest there. They smile at each other, Y with gratitude and excitement, X with flirtatious provocation.

Y: (taking the apple in hand) Put your hands behind your head.

X does so and Y rolls the apple gently to X's crotch as X did before. X then repeats. Then Y repeats. Then X takes the apple in hand. Short silence.

X: Do you remember when we lived together in the city?

Y: Which city?

X: The city where no one was happy except for us.

Y: (smile broadening uncontrollably) Yes.

X: Do you remember how I used to sleep late and you would get up early to read, but the place was so small you would never flush the toilet in case you woke me?

Y: Yes.

X: I'd wake up late and go to piss and there'd always be a big, wrinkled turd at anchor in the bowl.

Y: (smiling) I always shit first thing in the morning.

X: Yeah. Well, that was nice. Thanks. I mean I never said thanks, and that was nice.

Y holds hand out for the apple. X hands it to Y. Y rolls it gently against X's crotch as before. X lets the apple rest by crotch and both smile at each other in silence.

Y: I'm sorry about earlier.

X: Sorry about what?

Y: About when I was talking about Caroline. Sorry for talking like that, for wanting to own you like that when I talk. Sometimes it feels like I have no choice. I'm a little crazy sometimes...

X: You're okay.

Silence, smiles are gone now. Eventually X gets up, taking the apple with, and walks over to one of the square boxes and sits down.

Y: *(looking heartbroken)* Come back. Please.

X shakes head ruefully and the silence continues for a long time.

Eventually Y lies down on the big box with hands behind head looking up.

Y: *(cheerfully)* Hey, this is comfortable, maybe I don't want you here after all.

X: *(looks over at Y and smiles. Pause)* Okay! *(pause as continues to smile at Y, as one smiles at a child)* Hey, you're a good person you know.

Y: Why thank you.

X: Do you want to tell me about last night then?

Y: I believe I do.

X: Go on!

Y: *(excited)* Okay! So we're at the table with the glasses all filled to the brim, filled to the meniscus really. Caroline is singing but I can't hear her because of the music. I'm singing too and she can't hear me. *(as if suddenly realising something, Y cranes neck to look at X)* Did you ever sleep with Caroline?

X: No, never.

Y: *(lays head back down. Y can become suitably animated as recounts the story, perhaps gesticulating with hands)* Okay. So we're there. It's fun. It's alright like. And then this guy comes over and starts talking to Caroline and Caroline keeps singing and doesn't even look at him but isn't saying "fuck off" either really, like that, you know? And then the music gets quieter and I can hear every word. The guy asks Caroline to dance. She says no. The guy asks Caroline for a kiss. She says no. The guy asks Caroline if she wants a drink. She says: "Listen

mate, I've got five drinks here and another two on the way." And he says: "What do you mean?" And I cop so I hand her an empty pint glass and she vomits into it up to the brim like before. She puts the glass down on the table and while I'm looking for another glass the guy asks, as a joke right: "Is that for me?" And she says, without missing a beat: "No, but this one is!" and vomits all over his face!

X and Y laugh and then laugh themselves into a longish silence.

X: And what did the guy do?

Y: Oh, I don't know, washed his face probably!

They both laugh again. Very long silence.

Y: *(timidly)* Hey... hey, what went wrong between us?

X does not respond.

Y: *(sits up, straddling the big box)* No seriously, what went wrong? I'm happy now. I can take it.

X: *(heaving a sigh)* Leave it.

Y: Go on, please, for me.

X: *(looking at the ground)* Nothing went "wrong" between us. There wasn't anything to go wrong.

Y: What does that mean?

X: It never went right between us. We just tried and tried and tried and it never went right, *never.* *(pause)* And then I stopped trying.

Pause.

Y: Okay, that's true.

X: *(looking up at Y)* And now you should stop trying too.

Long silence.

X: Okay?

Y: Okay.

Very long silence.

Y: Hey, come sit with me.

X: *(looking over at Y who seems earnest and calm)* I'd like that.

X gets up and walks towards Y on the big box, one of arms dangling low with the apple grasped loosely in fingers. Y follows X's approach with eyes, watches X sit down, straddling the box and facing Y. Silence.

X: I like apples.

Y: What?

X: I like apples.

Y: Sure. Why's that?

X: Because I don't always like them. I just eat them every day. It's a practice. I eat one every day. Sometimes they're sour or too watery or dry as dust. But sometimes they're juicy and crunchy and just delicious. And that's why I eat them every day, because sometimes they're delicious. *(pause)* And then sometimes they're not...

Pause.

X: *(offering the apple)* Want a bite?

Y: *(palm raised in refusal)* No, I'm okay.

X: You sure?

Y: Yeah, maybe later. You go ahead, taste it.

X: *(goes to bite into the apple but stops)* Naw, maybe later.

They smile at each other, then lose their smiles and stare down at the box between their legs. After a while, X rolls the apple over to Y, letting it roll gently off upturned palm: it thuds onto the box and rolls over to Y. Y stares at the apple where it comes to rest between thighs. Then Y picks it up and rolls it back lazily to X, letting it roll off upturned palm in the same manner as X did. They repeat this several times, always with eyes fixed downwards. Eventually X stops, letting the apple rest between thighs. Long silence.

X: *(taking the apple in hand and looking up at Y)* Why are we still doing this? Can't we just stop? All of it, what does it even matter anymore?

Y: *(eyes still fixed downwards)* It matters to me. It means something to me, all of it. And it always will.

X: *(sceptical and impatient)* I really— I really don't see how it can.

Y: *(looking up into X's eyes)* It's not a joke for me.

X: You're right, it's not a joke, it's more like a bad dream.

Y: No. No. I'm not a joke. And I'm not a bad dream.

X: You're not anything anymore. This whole thing though, it's stale as rock. (*softening*) Now it is at least. (*imploring Y to understand*) And it's been this way for a while, you know...

Y: (*chastened, looks down*) Yes, I know, now yes, *now* all its flavour's gone, *now* it makes us want to scream...

X: But...

Y: (*looks back up into X's eyes, voice earnest but weak*) But we both know that it wasn't always this way.

Short pause. Dozens of apples suddenly fall from above, thudding in showers on the stage. Characters do not react, continue staring each other in the eyes. Long silence after as they continue to stare. Then (perhaps first raising hand to increase the effect) X drops the apple to the floor with a thud. Lights out.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

The initial inspiration for "Apples" was incredibly simple. In an interview, David Mamet said something along the lines of drama being about what lies behind superficial conflict. He gave the example of two people arguing over an apple, and pointed out that what's interesting in this situation is the hidden emotional content that lies behind such situations. A pretty obvious observation, but at the time I was just beginning to write for theatre (having before written almost exclusively short fiction) and I decided to run with the idea.

Some years before a friend of mine had began writing a play that could be acted by any gender. I stole this idea too (which at the time in 2008 was pretty new, to me at least).

After those initial ideas, I mostly felt my way through the play, without any clear plan. An interesting dynamic emerged between the characters, and at some point what was intended to be merely a writing exercise became something more. I did not set out to explore an ambiguous relationship and its dynamics of attention and need, but that's what happened.

My favourite playwrights are pretty standard: Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Brian Friel, Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett. Most plays I write tend to be relatively realistic and this makes "Apples" an exception for me.

AUTHOR BIO: Dermot O'Sullivan is an Irish writer whose work has been published in various journals including The Honest Ulsterman, Causeway/Cabhsair, The Dalhousie Review and Fence. He currently lives in Brazil, where he recently had his first full-length play produced.

