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U.S. THEATER CRITICS HONOR E.M. LEWIS' *Song of Extinction*

***Playwright receives \$25,000 Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award;
\$7,500 Citations for Lee Blessing and Tracy Letts***

The American Theatre Critics Association has selected **E.M. (Ellen) Lewis' *Song of Extinction*** to receive the **2009 Harold and Mimi Steinberg /ATCA New Play Award**. The announcement was made April 4 at Actors Theatre of Louisville during the Humana Festival of New American Plays. The award includes a plaque and a cash prize of \$25,000 –the largest national award for a new play.

Lee Blessing's *Great Falls* and **Tracy Letts' *Superior Donuts*** received Steinberg/ATCA citations and \$7,500 each. Both Lewis and Letts are first-time winners, but Blessing previously won the 2006 Steinberg/ATCA Award for *A Body of Water*, and in 1987 he won the predecessor ATCA New Play Award for *A Walk in the Woods*.

The award was started in 1977 to honor plays that debut at regional theaters outside New York City, where there are many new play awards. No play is eligible if it has gone on to a New York production within the award year (in this case, 2008).

“The long-standing partnership between the Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust and the American Theatre Critics Association has recognized some of today's greatest writers, and helped identify the great playwrights of tomorrow,” said trustee Jim Steinberg. “We're delighted to help support the unique telling of tales on the American stage.”

Lewis' *Song of Extinction* debuted in November at Moving Arts in Hollywood after having been featured in NYU's hotINK International Festival of New Plays and receiving a reading in the Atlantic Theater's Next Page series. It has already won several awards, including the EcoDrama Playwriting Competition, the L.A. Drama Critics Circle Ted Schmitt Award for a world premiere and the LA Weekly award for production of the year.

Blessing's *Great Falls* is a wry drama about a stepfather and his disaffected stepdaughter trying to make connections on a road trip across the American West. It was produced in February 2008 at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville.

Letts' *Superior Donuts* is a comic drama portraying the resurrection of a former '60s radical who is hiding from disappointments and tragedies by running a tiny Chicago doughnut shop. His isolation is challenged by a young black man seeking a job and running from some secrets of his own. It premiered in June at Steppenwolf Theater.

In Lewis' *Song of Extinction*, Max, a musically gifted high school student, is falling off the edge of the world, and his biology teacher is the only one who's noticed. According to the ATCA New Play committee, it starts as a realistic examination of ecology, genocide, isolation, music, family relationships and more, but it morphs into a dreamscape which weaves the disparate strands into a pattern of inter-connectedness.

“I’d like to thank the Steinberg family and ATCA,” said a visibly excited Lewis. “I feel so honored to receive this award for my play. It is an amazing gift.”

Lewis has accomplished a lot in a short playwriting career. Last year, she won ATCA’s \$10,000 Francesca Primus Award for *Heads*, a hostage drama set against the war in Iraq that Edward Albee called “provocative and wonderfully threatening.” Her *Infinite Black Suitcase*, a large ensemble play about grief and survival in rural Oregon, received its world premiere in 2007. On her web site (www.dramatistsguildweb.com/members/emlewis) Lewis quotes James Baldwin: “The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers.” She comes from Oregon but now lives in Santa Monica, California.

Some two dozen scripts were nominated by ATCA members, and the winners were chosen by a committee led by Wm. F. Hirschman of the South Florida Sun-Sentinel. Other committee members are Misha Berson, Seattle Times; Bruce Burgun, Bloomington Herald Times and Back Stage; Michael Elkin, Jewish Exponent (Pa.); Jay Handelman, Sarasota Herald-Tribune; Pam Harbaugh, Florida Today (Melbourne); Leonard Jacobs, New York Press, Back Stage and The Clyde Fitch Report; Chad Jones, Oakland (Cal.) Tribune; Elizabeth Keill, Independent Press (Morristown, NJ); Elizabeth Maupin, Orlando Sentinel; Wendy Parker, The Village Mill (Midlothian, Va.); Michael Sander, Back Stage (Minn.); and Herb Simpson, Totaltheater.com (Rochester, NY).

Honorees since 1977 have included Lanford Wilson, Marsha Norman, August Wilson, Jane Martin, Arthur Miller, Mac Wellman, Adrienne Kennedy, Donald Margulies, Lynn Nottage, Horton Foote and Craig Lucas. Last year’s winner was Moises Kaufman for *33 Variations*, now being staged on Broadway. Each year’s honorees are chronicled in *The Best Plays Theater Yearbook*, edited by Jeffrey Eric Jenkins, alongside the 10 best plays produced that year in New York City. For a complete list of the 80 plays cited from 1977 through 2008, go to www.americantheatre critics.org, under Awards.

The Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust was created in 1986 by Harold Steinberg on behalf of himself and his late wife. Pursuing its primary mission to support the American theater, it has provided millions of dollars to support new productions of American plays and educational programs for those who may not ordinarily experience live theater.

ATCA was founded in 1974 and works to raise critical standards and public awareness of critics’ functions and responsibilities and to recognize excellence in the American theater. The only national association of professional theater critics, with several hundred members working for newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations and websites, ATCA is the U.S. national section of the International Association of Theatre Critics, a UNESCO-affiliated organization that sponsors seminars and congresses worldwide.

ATCA also presents the M. Elizabeth Osborn Award, honoring emerging playwrights, and the \$10,000 Francesca Primus Prize, funded by the Francesca Ronnie Primus Foundation, honoring outstanding contributions to the American theater by a female artist who has not yet achieved national prominence. Annually it makes a recommendation for the Regional Theater Tony Award, presented by the American Theatre Wing/Broadway League, and its members vote on inductions into the Theater Hall of Fame. For more information on ATCA, visit www.americantheatre critics.org.