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LIVE THEATER, UNSOLICITED COMMENTARY.
FROM DETROIT TO LANSING.

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WHILE WE WERE BOWLING

TICKETS

If Carter W. Lewis's *While We Were Bowling* is nothing else, it is supremely titled. In actuality, the play — and this John Lepard–directed production at Williamston Theatre — is a cavalcade of "else," from family squabbles to curses from beyond the grave to race relations to suppressed homosexuality to substance abuse to inappropriate romances to narration that looks both forward and backward. With so much happening, in fact, the play's over-the-top unifying theme is a welcome throughline: as advertised, everything that happens to the Irish-Catholic "Bowling McGlaughlins" of Buffalo is distilled through the lens of the family's all-encompassing pastime.

Daughter Lydia (Kelly Studnicki) doubles as omniscient narrator; years away from the play's 1957 setting, she muses that those days that really alter our lives are relatively few. The first act, guided by her own need for recollection, lays out one such day, framed by the approaching All-City bowling tournament. Patriarch Melvin (Joseph Albright), so patriotically paranoid that he sent the kids for Russian language lessons to ready them for invasion, takes Lydia and perfectionist son Brent (Tyler VanCamp) to the alley to practice, where the kids' initial gee-whiz wholesomeness rapidly deteriorates. Melvin aches to surpass his own father's as-yet untouchable lifetime high score, which distracts him from seventeen-year-old Lydia's revelation of the truth behind her relationship with the potentially reformed, dweeby-tough team alternate Stickpin (Edward O'Ryan). Back at home, mom Frances (Suzi Regan) revels in her alone time — which is amber colored and comes from a bottle stashed in the hi-fi — until a preteen black boy named Jeremy (Aya Obayan) arrives to install the family TV set as well as himself in the living room. With so much going on, there's a prevailing soapy feel to the proceedings, but the characters don't lose their dimension; even Albright's maniacal focus on bowling and post-McCarthyist fervor are well packaged in a character who is, at his worst, merely accustomed to being in the driver's seat where his family is concerned.

If the first act shows a family sustaining a few hits, then the second chronicles its fast-acting downward spiral. Brent chooses to move in with Uncle John (Albright, in a Jekyll-and-Hyde double role) in protest of the McGlaughlin house's changing occupancy; VanCamp's external disapproval is an open book into the character's internal disgust. Obayan's lovable, babbling Jeremy finds a wealth of humor in his adoration of television, but it's underscored by simple ingrained courage. Studnicki and O'Ryan play off each other with ease as they navigate their characters' expiring relationship and its secondary effects; as Lydia's role in the family dynamic recedes, Stickpin's believably matures. Yet even given the wealth of stories and performances, the other characters are well and fully eclipsed by Regan's quixotic Frances, beset on all sides by apathetic ruin and accidental redemption happening in tandem. Her portrayal of a desperately flawed woman trying to find her way with little support and to do right by her children in the face of her failing capabilities moves the entire story along to a quiet conclusion that carries surprising resonance.

Marking a great step in the growing partnership between the Michigan State University theater department and this nearby professional theater, all four of the children are played by undergraduate and graduate students, and many others involved with the production are students and staff as well. Scenic designer Kirk Domer's kitschy bowl-a-rama setting finds its zenith in the deliciously extravagant searchlight-inlay floor design, a superb detail in a set that alternately represents domicile and bowling alley. Jodi Ozimek's perfectly tailored costumes revel in many of the trademark looks of the 50s, from

MEET THE ROGUE

Carolyn Hayes is the Rogue Critic, a sometime actor and improviser with a ticket stub and an opinion.

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