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Annie Baker's *John* is a religious experience



Photo by Dahlia Katz

Annie Baker is a playwright who can make you believe in God.

Baker is the Pulitzer Prize-winning American who is a leading practitioner of a new form of theatre that I've been calling numinous naturalism. It somehow makes all the other "naturalistic" plays you've seen feel decidedly unnatural afterward, while also infusing everyday activity with a sense of the divine. She shares the genre with Stephen Karam, who wrote last year's extraordinarily ordinary Tony-winning play *The Humans* – a title that could be affixed to any of Baker's deeply humanistic, yet somehow spiritual, plays written over the past decade.

John is the play with which The Company Theatre is finally introducing Baker to Toronto audiences in a professional capacity; it's her latest work, having premiered off-Broadway a year and a half ago. The action, if you can call it that, begins with a young couple, Jenny (Loretta Yu) and Elias (Philip Riccio), arriving at a bed and breakfast in Gettysburg that is chock-full of tchotchkes; dolls and knickknacks cover every surface and much of the floor.

Mertis (Nancy Beatty), who also goes by the name of Kitty, is the proprietor and she's instantly recognizable – a lonely older woman who struggles to contain her enthusiasm for company of any sort.

Baker has an incredible ear for how North Americans truly speak – and Mertis's dialogue is exquisitely written, her circular phrasing, repetitions, frequent pauses accompanied by an eager smile. She moves true to life as well in Beatty's performance: It's almost jarring to see her shuffle across the stage at the actual pace of life. This hyperrealism means the play comes to run for

almost three and a half hours (with two intermissions) – but while you feel the time pass, the evening is never an endurance challenge and remains consistently funny and moving, with space for thought.

You might think of Mertis and her overloaded living room as "tragic," as Elias does, but if she never entirely loses her strangeness over the course of the play, she also becomes increasingly concrete as a character. Beatty, an underused veteran actress, is extraordinarily ordinary in the role – hilarious and heartbreaking in her dieting regime, filled with love and a bit lost. It's a joy to simply watch her amble across the stage drawing a curtain between acts – a rare bit of theatricality in Jonathan Goad's nervy and noteworthy debut as a director.

What is the plot of *John*, you may ask? Well, there's tension between Jenny, a writer of questions for a game show, and Elias, a drummer and computer programmer – and the source of it is left unrevealed for ages. At the start, you might write it off as the usual side effects of a long road trip accentuated by Elias's withdrawal symptoms from an antidepressant and Jenny's crippling menstrual cramps – depicted with unusual accuracy, like everything else here.

Elias ends up abandoning Jenny at the B&B to tour the battlefields and graveyards of the Civil War by himself – and she spends an evening drinking pinot grigio with Mertis and her blind friend Genevieve (Nora McLellan) in this uncanny valley of the dolls. This scene is the triumph of the show – with Genevieve, eccentric, attuned to sounds (of ghosts?) in the empty rooms upstairs, a kind of a blind prophet whose wisdom could easily be mistaken for madness. She has a speech about actually going

insane for a spell in her 40s and thinking she was possessed by her ex-husband after leaving him that will bring laughs and tears in equal measure.

McLellan and Beatty both deserve to be considered award time for their performances – and Yu is a real discovery who will hopefully become a mainstay in Toronto theatre. (Expect a Dora Award nod, too, for designer Shannon Lea Doyle – who has done a jaw-dropping job of assembling what looks like a million miniatures.)

A recurring theme in *John* is that of judgment – the people in your life who won't accept you as you are, and the voices in your head that echo them. As the chief judge of the evening, Elias, Philip Riccio has the hardest role – a man who keeps entering scenes and messing up the female feng shui. That he's right about so much only makes him that much more infuriating – and I felt like either the writing or the performance could use a little softening.

A self-pitier straight out of Chekhov (which Baker has adapted to great effect; her Uncle Vanya was at the Shaw Festival this summer), Elias watches everything, even as he can't stand being watched.

Which brings us to God. Is there something else watching us beyond the domineering men in our lives and our mind? In *John*, it's suggested that the dolls that line Mertis's walls might be a personal audience for our dramas – but also perhaps a deity or the universe.

Do our watchers judge us or forgive and protect us?

John, it is eventually revealed, is the name of two off-stage characters – but I couldn't help but wonder if there was a New Testament resonance to the title of the play, too. Elias and Jenny's struggle is truly confessing and truly forgiving – while Baker's working principle as a playwright could be described as essentially Christian, proof that the divine would show up in the form of a human being, because it does every day.

While her work is secular, spending time with Baker's creations, with Mertis, Genevieve, Jenny and I suppose even Elias, reminded me of the words of Saint Josemaria: "There is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations and it is up to each of you to discover it."

I find Baker's work deeply moving and nourishing in a way others find religion at this time when many of us are giving up on one another.