

Beliefs, perceptions & connections in the intimate, otherworldly *John*



Photo by Dahlia Katz

Everybody knows someone named John.

The Company Theatre tells a compelling story with its Canadian premiere of Annie Baker's *John*, directed by Jonathan Goad in his directorial debut, running at Canadian Stage's Berkeley Street Upstairs Theatre.

Entering the space, we find the set enclosed in a semi-circle with red curtains, and it's not until Mertis (aka Kitty) (Nancy Beatty) enters to draw the curtains are we able to take it in. The revealed space is the common living room and dining area of Mertis's B&B in Gettysburg—and we become immediately immersed in this world, almost out of time and space.

Knick knacks, dolls, stuffed animals and all manner of chachkas fill the space. Antique dolls, a miniature village, angel and animal statuettes, and the like line the shelves and tables, along with a number of lamps. Prints, and even cookie tins, adorn the walls. In the corner near the front door is a Christmas tree, covered in lights, but without decorations or a star. Twinkly lights glow throughout the two rooms; and an Eiffel Tower sits on one of the small café tables in the dining area.

Throughout the course of the action, Mertis advances the hands on the grandfather clock, as night turns into day and into night again as the days go by. Classical music plays on the miniature jukebox that sits on top of the upright piano, also operated by Mertis, who also closes and opens the curtains surrounding the space at the close and start of each act. We're being let into this world, but on condition.

Young couple Elias (Philip Riccio) and Jenny (Loretta

Yu) arrive at the B&B later than expected that night, receiving a warm welcome from Mertis, who gives them a tour. They're surprised when the room they booked isn't available, and their host seems edgy and vague about some leak issue, but they happily accept the upgrade to another room at no extra charge.

As the scenes unfold, we witness increasing tension between Elias and Jenny, and we learn that they're not just on this trip to take in Gettysburg's history and points of interest. They're trying to fix their broken relationship. Jenny is receiving a lot of texts, which she says are from her sister, but Elias is skeptical to the point of obsessed suspicion about their true origin.

There is something strange and almost unreal about the B&B and its host. Mertis seems a quiet and introverted, but eccentric, soul; with a fondness for knick knackery, she has an ethereal, spiritual vibe about her. More than meets the eye, we find out that she has a husband, George, who we never see. Married for 13 years, it's her second marriage.

Added to the mix is Mertis's friend Genevieve (Nora McLellan); blind, with a gravelly voice and gruff manner. She too was married once, but left her husband in the mid-60s only to find he'd followed her and taken over her soul. Concerned she was losing her grip on reality, she checked herself into a mental institution.

Fears and sources of dread emerge as the characters share personal anecdotes. Elias has a phobia of birds. Jenny grew up thinking her dolls and stuffed animals were sentient beings—and one doll in particular haunts her memory. Even the B&B has an edge; the chachkas seeming to be watching from the dark at night, and the Christmas tree lights keep going off

inexplicably. Mertis believes that the house, which served as a Union army hospital during the Civil War, has a personality of its own—and that certain rooms can be temperamental. And the second floor always seems to be cold, which makes you wonder.

Mental illness, reality and relationships are called into question—nothing is as it seems. Who or what is watching; and who is being watched? Baker leaves it to us to decide what's real, what's true and what's going on.

Marvellous work from this four-hander cast. Beatty gives the soft-spoken Mertis a lovely, eerie edge. One gets the impression that the Christmas tree could be up all year round. What's with that journal Mertis keeps? And what's going on with George? At one point, you're wondering if he actually exists. McLellan's Genevieve is a delightful puzzle of kookiness, sharp observation and loving friend; at one point, she sounds like a paranoid schizophrenic—but then you think, if you think someone's out to get you, it might actually be true. Like Mertis drawing the curtains and turning the clock, Genevieve draws us into this world—and is the only character that speaks to us directly.

Riccio's Elias is a complex combination of uptight and neurotic, wounded and longing. At first, you think he's being paranoid about Jenny's communications; but as the play unfolds, you begin to wonder if he's right to suspect. And Yu's Jenny reveals a darker edge under that adorably spontaneous, child-like exterior. Struggling to understand where Elias is coming from, she feels abandoned and is possibly acting out as a result. Which are the lies and which are the truths? And is her anxiety about her dolls and toys the result of a guilty conscience?

Whether its origins lie in religion, family and relationship history, or a perceived connection with the universe, for each character, there's a belief in an unseen presence watching, directing—in some cases, taking over, rewarding and punishing.

With big shouts to the design team: Shannon Lea Doyle (set/costumes), Kevin Lamotte (lighting) and Michael Laird (sound) for their outstanding work on creating this strange and spooky world.

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