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John is a play about relationships, loneliness, trust, truth, friendship, kindness and mystery. It's been given an exquisite production by director Jonathan Goad and his terrific cast.

The Story. Elias and his girlfriend Jenny arrive at Mertis Katherine Graven's bed and breakfast in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, ready to begin a little vacation in which Elias wants to visit the various Civil War battle sites in the area. Mertis (called 'Kitty') is an accommodating but odd woman. We learn quickly that all is not smooth in Elias and Jenny's relationship. She's got secrets and he seems a natural depressive and does not fully trust her. The house also holds mysteries and secrets of its own. And there is Genevieve, Kitty's blind friend, who hears noises in the house that no one else hears. Welcome to the world of Annie Baker.

The Production. In true Baker form we never see John, and are not totally sure who he might be. There are two mysterious possibilities we learn over the course of the play. One of the beauties of the play is trying to parse through the information given to find the truth.

A red curtain surrounds the playing area as the audience files in to the theatre. When the play is about to begin, Mertis draws the curtain back revealing Shannon Lea DoYLES' wonderful set of Kitty's living room and the breakfast room. Every surface is packed with 'chatchkes', miniature doll figurines, dolls of various sizes, pictures of dolls, lamps, an upright piano. A sofa, chairs, stuff. The Breakfast Room has several tables and chairs with a small fridge up at the back and a shelving unit with cups, mugs, cereals etc. There is a small model of the Eiffel Tower on one of the tables, hence the room is called the Paris Room.

Kitty is taking care of her sick husband George whom we never see. We learn quickly that all is not smooth in Elias and Jenny's relationship. She's got secrets that she doesn't tell Elias and he seems a natural depressive and does not fully trust her. The house also holds mysteries and secrets of its own. Kitty bristles subtly when she finds out that Jenny went into one of the rooms that is off limits.

And there is Genevieve, Kitty's blind friend who hears noises in the house that no one else hears. She also thought she was going mad because she felt she was being bedevilled by her late husband John's spirit so

she checked herself into the hospital to cope. Welcome to the world of Annie Baker.

This is certainly a challenging play we are blessed to have a gifted director in Jonathan Goad and a wonderful cast. We know of Jonathan Goad's wonderful acting abilities from his work at the Stratford Festival and elsewhere. Amazingly, this is his first effort at directing. It's thoughtful, polished, intelligent and so knowing about the play and its quirks. There are a lot of pauses and silence in an Annie Baker play as the actors take their time in building moments and reveal their character's inner selves. Goad gives them and the play the room needed to breathe. Baker is as challenging for the audience as she is for actors playing in her plays.

Because her scenes unfold and evolve slowly her plays can last three hours or even longer, and each moment is vital in building the atmosphere of the scene, or reveal something of a character or moment.

For example, Elias looks around the breakfast (Paris) room to see where things are. He makes himself a bowl of cereal and pours the milk and then eats his cereal by first sucking the milk out of the spoon then chomping on the rest of the crunchy cereal. Since he's alone in the room we see this first to establish this quirk.

When Jenny joins him after that, it drives her crazy and she gently tells him after he goads her. We can see how annoying that could be. It takes and needs time to be revealed.

The acting is fabulous. It's a cast of four and each one shines. Philip Riccio plays the mournful, depressive Elias with an almost fastidiousness in his self-absorption. It's easy to be annoyed by Elias because of the uncompromising way that Riccio plays him.

Loretta Yu plays Jenny with a different kind of angst. She has secrets that she is keeping from Elias and she has to lie about them in order to save the relationship. One wonders if Elias wants to save it too, what with all his chipping away at her. Jenny does an interesting job of trying to cover up and hide her secrets, at the same time, letting Elias and us know she is irritated by him.

Nancy Beatty as Kitty, is an optimistic, accommodating host, but clearly lets us know things are not as rosy as we are led to believe in that house. Her



smile is tight but her eyes are fearful. But Beatty has moments of breathtaking joy when simple things fill her full of pleasure. And Nora McLellan is masterful in the part of the odd friend, Genevieve. Genevieve is blind and wears sunglasses. McLellan is absolutely still on a sofa, facing us.

Every line is beautifully paced and so wildly funny because of the pacing, and deliberate way McLellan speaks, frames her jokes and sets us up. From her first line we are primed to pay close attention to this compelling woman she is so funny and odd. In a way it's a 'sucker part,' a gift. The beauty is that McLellan never overplays it. She is always understated and focused.

Comment. At 35 years old, Annie Baker is a force in the theatre. Her plays are substantial with a distinct voice and focus. They have won all manner of awards including the Pulitzer Prize for *The Flick*—fantastic play about an old fashioned cinema and the film geeks who work there.

Each successive play has the same characteristics of characters that are deeply drawn and quirky dealing with real issues. But each new play is totally fresh and provocative.

Annie Baker's plays are substantial. They are not for those who want their plays over in 90 minutes. They are not for those who think in tweets. Annie Baker's world is full of quirky characters with weighty issues that they think about long and deeply. Her plays are full of pauses that might remind some of Harold Pinter, fragmented thoughts and ideas reminiscent of Edward Albee and head-shaking juxtapositions in language as found in the works of Caryl Churchill. But in truth Annie Baker's plays are totally like no one else but Annie Baker. She has a definitive but subtle voice that is enhanced by the silences that envelope many of her scenes. They are deceptive in that one might be fooled into thinking nothing is happening. In truth everything is happening. The trick is this that when a scene seems to linger in languid action but no speech and one is tempted to turn off, that is when one must be most watchful. Baker is 'talking', saying volumes. Her characters and themes are illuminated in those silences.

Elias noisily eating his cereal; Jenny curled up in her blankets trying to get warm; Genevieve behind dark glasses quietly, methodically letting us in on her mysterious way of thinking; these are small moments that are resounding.

Annie Baker's plays are not for those who want their plays over in 90 minutes. They are not for those who think in tweets. For those serious about their theatre, the payoff is enormous.