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Published February 7, 2017

‘NNNNN’

# John shows the extraordinary beneath the ordinary

The Company Theatre’s production of three-hour play set in a quaint B&B will have you rivetted to your seat



Photo by Guntar Kravis

The title and setting of Annie Baker’s play *John* couldn’t be more ordinary. But that’s intentional. What’s hidden beneath them is extraordinary, as is Jonathan Goad’s production for Company Theatre.

Late one night, young New York couple Elias (Philip Riccio) and Jenny (Loretta Yu) arrive at a quaint bed and breakfast. It’s run by a kindly older woman named Mertis (Nancy Beatty), who’s very proud of her tchotchke-filled home, which even includes a dining area modelled on her hacked notion of a Paris café.

Elias is Jewish and Jenny Asian-American, and they’re both obviously much hipper than their host. So will this be a commentary on class, race and age in a divided America? Not quite. Turns out the B&B is in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and the pair is there to visit Civil War sites but also to fight over their troubled relationship.

Mertis is more complex than she seems. For one thing, there’s the sick husband she lives with who never appears. And that weather journal she keeps – what language is it written in? And then there’s her blind friend Genevieve (Nora McLellan), a rough-looking survivor who’s currently being haunted by her ex.

All of these things add to the play’s mystery. Baker has the uncanny ability to write engaging scenes that seem to be about nothing but, when placed together, suggest a lot.

The key to a play like this is establishing the right tone, and director Goad finds it, mixing straight naturalism with gentle social satire and elements of horror and suspense.

Baker even uses that hoary old cliché about the haunted doll – the subject of half a dozen movies in the last few years – to explore big ideas about moral culpability and conscience.

The actors are superb. Beatty, seen too infrequently onstage, finds a timeless, enchanted quality to Mertis that’s never self-conscious; McLellan, hidden mostly behind a pair of dark glasses, is a presence even when she’s not talking (and surely it’s not a coincidence that her character’s name sounds like Jenny’s).

Riccio, always a compelling, intense actor, creates a complex portrait of a wounded and unhappy man. The surprise is Yu, who works mostly in film and TV but feels fully relaxed and present onstage, her character believable in all her contradictions.

It’s hard to separate this production – and its themes – from the design. Shannon Lea Doyle’s intentionally cluttered set and Kevin Lamotte’s lighting appear alternately benign and sinister, while Michael Laird’s sound design makes you feel like you’re in an actual inn, eavesdropping on people arguing on another floor.

The play, like Baker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Flick*, runs over three hours. And you’ll be engrossed by all of it.