

# ‘A magnificent evening’: John boasts as good and reverberant a final curtain-line as you are ever likely to encounter



Photo by Dahlia Katz

I fear that anything I write about John may be a spoiler. This play, by the rising young American playwright Annie Baker, lasts more than three hours but has no dull moments. It has little story but its surprises never stop.

Intermissions in today’s theatre are practically an endangered species, but John has two of them. Even more startlingly, it has a curtain. I can’t remember when I last saw one of those. This one is opened and closed, at the beginning of each act, by one of the characters, an elderly woman whose name is Mertis. That’s fair enough. She’s welcoming us into her home.

She runs a bed and breakfast. It’s crowded with furniture and loaded with bric-a-brac: clocks including a grandfather, a player piano, a Christmas tree (it’s Thanksgiving), a miniature Eiffel Tower in the breakfast nook that Mertis calls “Paris,” and an extraordinary collection of dolls. In Company Theatre’s production, all these details – mandated by the author – have been stunningly realized by the designer, Shannon Lea Doyle. One reason for the concealing curtain, also prescribed, may be to let us all marvel at what’s revealed when it’s drawn aside.

As the play begins, Mertis is greeting her latest and only guests, Elias and Jenny, a young couple who have been dating for three years and whose relationship is in trouble. She’s Asian, he’s a self-described “Jewish atheist.” He’s also a Civil War buff, come to check out the battlefield sights; she’s humouring him but has to leave the tour early, due to menstrual cramps.

Returning to the bed and breakfast, she’s introduced to Mertis’ friend Genevieve, who is blind and says she was once mad, driven to it by her late husband John. “I know someone named John,” says Jenny, to which Genevieve replies “everyone knows someone called John.” Well, yes, everyone does; but in this play, the name carries freight. Genevieve’s John seems to be the devil, or at least the opposite of God.

Jenny’s John was a man with whom she cheated on Elias, and of whom Elias remains furiously jealous. Baker writes dialogue that sounds both natural and mysterious, like vintage Pinter (whose *The Birthday Party* was another three-act boarding-house play) but with the menace less overt. Her words form an intricate web, endlessly suggestive.

“Mertis,” says Genevieve, “takes very good care of her matter.” By “matter” she means what others might call “clutter,” the things that fill Mertis’ house. The play is partly about “things,” the spells they cast. At two startling points, the player-piano starts unexpectedly up, tinkling out “Yes Sir, That’s My Baby” (rather well) and “Me and My Shadow” (rather badly), the latter coinciding with another sound-source that favours Bach.

While the two musics battled it out, I found myself transfixed by another “thing:” the pendulum on the big clock, hypnotically swinging. Mertis also has “an American girl doll” called Samantha. Jenny had the identical doll as a child, and was afraid of it: she felt Samantha was “incredibly angry” with her. “Of course she was angry,” says Genevieve, “to be shaped into a human form, and trapped.”

By Robert Cushman

Published February 7, 2017

Continued

Mertis, by benevolent contrast, feels “watched over,” ever since meeting her second husband, George, who is ill and never appears, and whom Elias, rightly or wrongly, thinks doesn’t exist. Jenny, in a wonderful scene between the three women, talks of a moment when she felt “the universe was having sex with me” and she felt, if not “watched,” then “held.”

I haven’t mentioned Elias’ childhood trauma and present fits of depression; or the slavery diorama in the Gettysburg Museum with mannequins as the slaves; or Mertis’ confession: “I romanticize birds very much;” or Elias’ hatred of them; or the rooms in Mertis’ establishment named after Civil War worthies. Genevieve likes “the Jennie Wade room,” that Jennie who was collateral damage at the beginning of the Battle of Gettysburg. It leaves you fearful of what the play may have in store for its own Jenny.

Jonathan Goad’s production does justice to a rich text. This is an auspicious directorial debut for one of our leading actors, every line and every pause (there are many) is fully charged. It boasts four fine performances. Nancy Beatty as Mertis pads gently through the play as she does through the house, shy on the surface, confident within: an unassuming guardian angel.

Nora McLellan surpasses herself as Genevieve, oracular as that other blind prophet Tiresias, and funny. The two younger characters are the most conventionally written. Still, their bitter exchanges cut chillingly close to the bone, and are excellently played by Philip Riccio, with a new depth in his voice and bearing, and Loretta Yu, nerve-ends on alert.

Elias likes to tell Jenny “scary stories,” but never knows how to end them. The play, by contrast, has as good and reverberant a final curtain-line as you are ever likely to encounter. This is a magnificent evening.