

Stage Door

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John by Annie Baker, directed by Jonathan Goad



Photo by Dahlia Katz

Genevieve: “The thing about being crazy is that it might all be true”

January has just ended but the Company Theatre’s production of Annie Baker’s *John* may be one of the strangest, most riveting plays you see all year. In this work from 2015 Baker takes the realism still so beloved by American playwrights and pushes it to its limits. Very slowly right before your eyes a seemingly innocuous story takes on such deep psychological and metaphysical resonance and to blow your mind and make you laugh out loud all at once.

The simple story is that Elias (Philip Riccio) and his girlfriend Jenny (Loretta Yu) are on an excursion to visit the Civil War battlefields at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and stay in a local B&B during their visit. The most unusual aspect of the living and dining area of the B&B when the red curtains are pulled back by actor Nancy Beatty is that every square inch of the set is covered in knick-knacks and figurines of every shape and size to the point that some are sitting on the floor as the only available space.

Somehow all this “matter”, as one character calls it, immediately becomes comprehensible when we meet the aged proprietor of the B&B, Mertis Katherine Graven (Beatty), who prefers to be called “Kitty”. As beautifully played by Beatty, Kitty, though a senior, has retained a childlike way of expressing herself both in words and gestures. Beatty has Kitty walk in the deliberate way of a young girl who does want to create the new dress she is wearing. The huge collection of kitsch that covers every surface is like her collection of toys. The fact that they are all

stuffed animals, dolls or figurines suggests that Kitty has thus peopled her living area to keep loneliness at bay. We learn that she has been married for thirteen years to George, a character we never see, who is in the process of dying somewhere in the house.

Though Kitty realizes that she should give her guests privacy, it is obvious that having people to talk to is such a treat that she can’t help talking to them rather more than she should. Eventually, Elias and Jenny reach a stage where they themselves welcome the chance to talk to someone. The young people have been together three years, have broken up and are trying to see if they can get back together again. Elias feels trapped by Jenny. He thinks she is always watching him and disapproving. At the same time he accuses Jenny of constantly lying to him. For her part, Jenny can’t stand Elias’s constant suspicion and coldness.

Gradually we learn information that makes judging their relationship more complex. Elias is trying to wean himself off antidepressants and is suffering withdrawal symptoms as a result. Jenny also apparently cheated on Elias earlier with a man named John, but Jenny claims that she broke off her relationship with John because she knew it was wrong. Riccio and Yu convey their characters’ edginess from their first entrance and almost as much in the body language of their silences as in their speech, they show us how the two feel isolated from each other even when they are together.

While at first glance we may have thought Kitty was a bit peculiar, Baker shows us that these young people are odd in their own ways. Elias confesses to Kitty that after dating any woman for three months,

she begins to look like an insect to him, peering at him through a screen door. Initially, he thought Jenny was different but now she has fallen into the same pattern. As for Jenny, she is shocked to find that Kitty has the same doll, Samantha, that she had had as a girl, a doll to whom Jenny attributed human feelings and who would punish or reward her according to her behaviour.

Jenny confesses this secret to Kitty's best friend Genevieve Marduk (Nora McLellan), an elderly woman who went mad at age 45, recovered and went blind at age 57. In a fantastic performance, McLellan speaks as if decades of rage still motivates her every word and as if her years of madness have lent her transcendental wisdom. Jenny's madness began after she left her ex-husband named John. "Everyone knows a 'John'", she says, giving us a clue why Baker chose such a generic name for the title. She began to feel that everyone around her were his spies and eventually he invaded her mind and thus became inescapable.

While this was a harrowing experience that kept her institutionalized for five years, one insight it gave her was that knowledge similar to that in the Shinto religion that even inanimate objects have souls. For this reason Genevieve can fully understand why Jenny's Samantha should feel angry and would punish her. Like seers in ancient drama, the irascible Genevieve has deeper insight into the nature of the world now that she is blind than others do who can see.

What we gain from all this is that all four characters are haunted. Genevieve knows that Kitty's house is haunted, a fact that Kitty tries to downplay even though she knows some rooms are more "reliable" than others. Genevieve, however, hears a rustling or whispering every time she visits. Genevieve's madness, as she describes it, was the worst form of haunting imaginable where the spirit of her ex-husband entered her mind and wouldn't leave. Both Jenny and Elias feel haunted by events from their childhood but also feel that each is haunting the other in that both feel the other is constantly watching and judging rather than gazing out of love. It's not surprising given the imagery of that play that John is happiest with Jenny when she is so frozen from the cold that she acts like a statue, as if John merely loves her physical form but not her being.

Related to the theme of haunting is the theme of watching which has two aspects. The positive aspect is of being watched over or guarded. the negative aspect is simply being watched or objectified. Kitty and Elias have both experienced being watched over, unlike Genevieve and Jenny (Baker points out the similarity in name) who have merely felt watched. We begin to feel that Kitty has populated her house with so many figurines to give herself the feeling that she is watched over by as many objects as possible. Genevieve, however, being blind, has

to trust that Kitty will watch over her and that care she terms "love". Kitty's gentle leading Genevieve into and out of the house may be the most poignant demonstration of love in the play. In contrast, Jenny and Elias have ceased to trust each other and have thus lost any sense that one watches over the other. Instead, each accuses the other of merely watching.

Two results of Baker's attention to the realism of everyday life is that she allows the play's various meanings to develop haphazardly so that we have to work to uncover meaning by relating recurrent remarks to each other as they arise. Baker's ultimate theme is the isolation of all human beings and how they manage to cope with it. Kitty and Genevieve seem to cope quite well in completely different ways. Genevieve and Jenny have even experienced a mystical union with the universe, a sense of oneness that has helped Genevieve cope with being alone but so far has left Jenny feeling more alone. Indeed, what Jenny and Elias come to realize is that they are lonelier together than when they are apart.

The second result of Baker's realism is that she allows events to take place very slowly. The running time of the play is nearly three and a half hours. That may seem excessive but once you adjust yourself to the pace it feels completely natural and makes the action of other so-called realistic plays feel forced and rushed. The long periods of silence also has the function of emphasizing the isolation of the characters not just from each other but also in time and space.

Yet, despite Baker's emphasis on realism, she does allow non-realistic elements to punctuate the action. Each of the three acts opens and closes with Kitty opening and closing the red curtains that surround the acting area. She may act as host to Elias, Jenny and Genevieve, but she also acts as our host, too, letting us into her home as much as she does them, where we, like her many mute figurines watch what transpires before us. In a delightful conceit Baker has Kitty change the time of day by physically moving the hands on a grandfather clock. As she does so, Kevin Lamotte's beautiful lighting depicts through moving shadows the sun taking its course outside of Kitty's front windows. For one time only Baker allows an actor to break through the curtains and speak directly to the audience. Surprising as it is, we see that this break from realism corresponds directly with the subject matter discussed.

With its well-chosen cast totally immersed in their roles under the sensitive, intelligent direction of Jonathan Goad, Baker's *John* will make you feel as if there is nothing ordinary that is not also extraordinary. For good or ill you may never again think that any room is truly uninhabited.

