

Company Theatre's John a fine introduction to Annie Baker's work: review

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Photo by Dahlia Katz

People have time for Annie Baker. That's both in the business sense — winning the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for *The Flick* has made her a hot commodity in contemporary theatre — and the chronological sense.

Her plays take time. They're in no hurry, sometimes they meander; they relish pauses and minutiae, and deal in a thematic depth that can come only from the most mundane events.

And Baker deserves your time.

Toronto theatres haven't had time for her; either she's too in demand to get rights to her work or, perhaps, a three-act drama that runs three hours and 20 minutes seems impenetrable. But that's what you get in the Company Theatre's production of her newest work, 2015's *John*, and not a moment feels wasted.

In Stratford Festival actor Jonathan Goad's directorial debut, *John* doesn't try to tell a complete story but presents a period of time in a hyperrealistic style. The staging, performances, and pacing must all work together to keep any hint of performative artifice from colliding with Baker's uncanny ability to recreate natural speech patterns and behaviours onstage.

John is filled with mysteries that don't find conclusions, but Baker builds her world through details that accumulate to provide a breathtakingly wide view of her four characters, who meet at a

B&B in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. In fact, the play is dotted with moments large and small that illustrate fundamental truths about humanity: like B&B proprietor Mertis dotting her living room with countless trinkets, tchotchkes, figurines and dolls.

In *John*, Mertis (Nancy Beatty) is visited by Brooklynites Elias (Philip Riccio) and Jenny (Loretta Yu), a couple on the rocks on vacation to satisfy Elias's childhood fascination with the Civil War. During their stay they meet Mertis's friend Genevieve (Nora McLellan), the most traditionally enigmatic character, a blind woman who went mad in her 40s when she thought herself possessed by her ex-husband.

McLellan gets the most overtly complex character in Genevieve, but plays her with arresting empathy, charm and humour. And as the character that most straddles the line between reality and fantasy, she's also the only one to directly address the audience in a surprising and moving monologue describing her mental illness.

In that moment, Baker boldly embraces the audience, whereas most of the play tries to make us disappear. Goad counters this move by letting Mertis open and close each act by literally opening and closing a red curtain that surrounds Shannon Lea Doyle's meticulously decorated set (the hours that went into sourcing so much kitsch boggle the mind).

The impression is that these two women, each other's only reliable companions and mutual

sufferers of lost loves, have reached a new level of awareness of the world, or beyond. While Genevieve gruffly gives wise advice to Jenny, opting out of sightseeing due to period cramps, she also stops to listen to imaginary wings flutter above her head. Mertis finds the thrill in serving eggs to her guests in "Paris" (the name of the B&B's dining area), but her soft demeanour turns angelic (either benevolent or sinister, depending on your viewpoint) when the conversation comes to higher powers.

The theme of spirits, ghosts, possession and death hang over *John*, making it seem like Baker's attempt at a horror play. It's easy to find Mertis's B&B absolutely creepy to an unassuming tourist, not to mention the house's bloody battle history. But Baker's characterizations also explore a generational divide: the millennial characters are notably more navel-gazing.

Thankfully, Baker writes believable late 20s, early 30s characters, avoiding clichés.

Whereas Mertis and Genevieve are haunted by an otherworldly awareness, the story of Elias and Jenny and their inner turmoil examines how the ding of a text message can haunt and how a piece of technology allows a partner to live a separate life in plain sight.

The Company Theatre's production is an encompassing introduction to Baker's work, one we wish was running a bit longer.

