

Ghent Playhouse, Ghent, NY
The Nether by Jennifer Haley. Directed by Patrick White.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“What is virtual becomes reality.”

Without a doubt this is the strangest play you will see this season. . .or maybe next season as well. A Science-Fiction thriller it addresses a problem that has become a reality itself. Recent news stories about Artificial Intelligence (AI) replacing what has long been real have been both provocative and frightening. This ten-year-old play, developed at the O’Neill Center and first produced in California, takes us on a journey still to be traveled by authorities but clearly waiting to be taken. Detective Morris is investigating “The Hideaway” a virtual site where people may indulge their prurient pursuits with children. Constructed by a man named Sims, but known as Papa, it brings nine year old girls to older men with obsessions. The encounters in The Hideaway include sexual adventures as well as more violent activities. Watching this unfold in Patrick White’s production at the Ghent Playhouse may be psychotically disturbing to some people. . .or if you can buy into the concept of this show, it may prove enthralling.



Neal Berntson, Amy Hausknecht, Aaliyah Al-Fuhaid, George Filieau,
Aidan White; Photo: John Shea

A wonderful cast of actors have undertaken this theatre project and the result is dynamite theater, disturbing, somewhat confusing and definitely exciting - in a non-sexual way. Amy Hausknecht plays Detective Morris. She is rigidly objective in a deeply connected way and her verbal and physical attitudes add immensely to the oddness of the play. You ask yourself, “*what is her motive? What does she really want?*” throughout the ninety minutes of this single act

excursion. While no answer is ever given, conclusions may be drawn. Like Sims/Papa, each of the principal characters including Morris may have two identities. This is yours to discover, or is it really?

Papa/Sims is well played by George Filieau. He is an indomitable character, a man who cannot be swayed from the secrecy of his work, of his intentions. Or is that so? He himself plays many roles in his real and virtual lives. Has The Hideaway been designed for him alone and if so why are other people involved in it to such an extent and why does it matter if its virtual and not real. Filieau plays with the discretionary aspects of Sims and leaves us with unspoken, observed theories and answers.

His customer, Doyle, played here by Neal Berntson, holds clues to what is really going on, clues that he cannot disclose. Berntson gives Doyle a comic quirkiness that is delightful. He plays with our minds more than Filieau's Sims does and when the truth about their less than professional relationship is revealed it is mind-blowing.

Iris, the little girl who dances through everyone else's fantasies is played beautifully by Aaliya Al-Furhaid. Dancing, entrancing, demanding, glad-handing, evil and raw or "Marjorie Daw" the actress balances every change and shift on her lovely shoulders and makes her mark in every scene. Al-Furhaid is a find who will hopefully be around for a long time.

Morris's assigned investigator, Woodnut, is very well portrayed by Aidan White, an attractive young man who manages to bring an unexpected softness to the role. His scenes with Iris are very memorable and the evolution of his character, with its hidden parallels, make the play an exciting adventure.

Patrick White's direction of the play is often more distracting than it is helpful, but the play is written that way and there is little to be done about it. Overall, he has shepherded his company so very well that nothing is obscured and the most difficult passages emerge as revealing. What makes his work so important is the relevance to what we are just beginning to live through in real life; here he makes us witness our probable futures with AI. It's amusingly scary.

The production is just right for subject matter. Sam Reilly and Cathy Lee Visscher's almost matter-of-fact sets are perfect settings for the context and content of the play. Joanne Maurer's costumes fit the characters perfectly and the final array of clothing leaves the impression that it's all a dream and nothing to fear. Lighting by Joe Sicotte and Sound by Monk Schane-Lydon are fine, but I would have liked more sound in moments of darkness on stage.

You won't see another play like this one. A decade has given it a humorous gravitas and if you wait for the next production instead of seeing this one it will be too late to garner the alert and warnings in the play. So see it here and now.

+ 06/03/2023 +

The Nether plays at the Ghent Playhouse, Route 66 in Ghent, NY through June 18. For tickets and information go to ghentplayhouse.org.