

Ghent Playhouse, Ghent, NY  
**Circle Mirror Transformation** by Annie Baker. Directed by Brian D. Wagner,..  
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

*“I feel as if . . . I don’t know. . .of my life.”*

Annie Baker is a very good playwright. She truly knows how to create characters within their own words. I’ve liked pretty much every one of her plays. Brian D. Wagner is also a very talented man. Still, the only one of Baker’s plays I’ve never liked is this one, “Circle Mirror Transformation.” It won the OBIE Award for its first production, It has been highly touted as a brilliant expose of the actors’ experience and training. Maybe after a life in the theatre like mine it is just to redundant to appeal to my taste. I saw it last summer at Chester Theatre and didn’t enjoy it and now I’ve seen it again at the Ghent Playhouse and I didn’t enjoy it. The rest of the audience did, so it must be me.



Lara Denmark, Ariana Smart Truman, Matt Burnett, Taylor Slonaker, Chris Luongo;  
Photo: John Shea

Baker has said, “I knew I wanted there to be excruciating silences. I knew I wanted a doomed class romance that left one character embarrassed and the other heartbroken. I knew I wanted the characters to deliver monologues as each other....Eventually I realized that the fun of the play is the fact that it's confined to this dull, windowless little space." She has gotten what she wanted, and in my opinion she has gotten more than this. She has delivered a collection of self-absorbed people, actor-wanna-bes, who never truly connect with the future they seem to seek,



Ariana Smart Truman, Chris Luongo; Photo: John Shea

professionally or personally..

Led by Marty, a self-satisfied teacher played by Ariana Smart Truman, the group endures through pointless exercises and dreary little romances. They are amateurs all, well defined by this cast which is a good thing, who cannot endure the constant improvisations they are exhorted to perform. Truman does a fine job playing the exorciser who never flags. Her energy alone could carry the show through its almost two hour single act (no intermission in this play).

As her sometime lover and husband and painfully devoted student, James, Matt Burnett travels a painful road to an uncertain destiny. He is grand in the role and Director Wagner occasionally calls James's identity into question when he sparks with Schultz, a younger man played by Chris Luongo with a certain flair for charm and a comic methodology in sparking interesting reactions to impulses thrust in his direction.

Taylor Slonaker plays a high school student named Lauren who truly aspires to be an actress but finds the exercises they all perform to be tedious, uninteresting and painful (that I agree with which makes her my favorite character). Slonaker makes her statements in a voice that could cut glass, and this is perfect for the role. She wins the perfection in casting award for this presentation.

Chris Luongo seems young and may be younger than his program bio indicates/He does an excellent job in his role of a recently divorced carpenter seeking a new focus in life.

Theresa, who has done some acting, is played beautifully by Lara Denmark who also uses her hula hoop to very satisfying effect. She, rather than their teacher Marty, is the occasional voice of reason in this play Baker has painted her well with her words and she emerges almost a heroine in a situation that doesn't actually call for one.



Matt Burnett; Photo: John Shea



Lara Denmark; Photo: John Shea

Cathy Lee Visscher's spartan set is perfect for the play. The costumes by Ariana Smart Truman and Taylor Slonaker help to define the characters. Jesse Howard and Brian Wagner have designed very good lighting for this show, and producer Amy Hausknecht has held the production together nicely. For all that's good in this show I wish I liked this play a little bit more. A lot of hard work has gone into this final play of the Ghent's 49<sup>th</sup> season and it deserves the reward of good attendance. I'd have to say "risk it," you might like it, Much of the opening night audience did.

+ 06/07/2024 +

**Circle Mirror Transformation** plays at the Ghent Playhouse, 8 Town Hall Place, Ghent, New York through June 16. For information and tickets go to [www.ghentplayhouse.org](http://www.ghentplayhouse.org) or call 518-392-6264.