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## **'The Nether' at InterACT Theatre Company**

By Kelly Mintzer

The uninitiated, with an itchy Google finger, could relatively easily learn that *The Nether*, running now through April 17 at the Interact Theater, is a drama focusing on the investigation of a digital era crime, played out through technology just to the left of existing and familiar. While this assessment would be entirely accurate, it is the barest possible bones of the strange, beautiful philosophical and narrative nesting doll being presented by the InterAct Theater Company. **The theater space is small, but beautifully used; the staging has a certain immediate cinematic quality that is not typically associated with live theater, one that also translates well as a physical manifestation of the headier concepts grappled with throughout the running time.** *The Nether* is, more than anything else, a study in contrasts. Who we are versus who we wish we were; our perception of ourselves weighed against the reality of others. In the foreground, Morris, a young detective ably played with dark-suited severity by Bi Jean Ngo, separately interrogates two men in an effort to attain the IP address for "The Hideaway", a hybrid of chat-room, role playing game, and bordello. 'The Hideaway' is populated by digital avatars, created and controlled by adults who log-in through the Nether (somewhat nebulously defined as a very advanced virtual reality) and play the role of either a patron or of a child worker, employed to perform an initially ill-defined act that involves a bedroom and an axe. The answers to Morris's questions are revealed when the lights go up on a garden and the outline of an idyllic Victorian bedroom, where the precise nature of the Hideaway's business is exposed, primarily through the interactions of innocence-personified/main attraction, Iris (Emi Branes-Huff, gracefully navigating complicated language and difficult concepts) and the two men desperately drawn to her. Sims (Greg Wood, readily running the gamut between Machiavellian and uncomfortably sympathetic is basically perfect) is the proprietor, founder, creator and enforcer of the Hideaway. His affection for young Iris is the stuff that trigger warnings are made of, which should be stressed early and often.

This play is built out of trigger warnings. Switching seamlessly between the past tense at the brightly lit, old fashioned Hideaway and the present, where Morris's increasingly combative interrogation of Sims evolves away from questioning into metaphysical and philosophical debate, *The Nether* reveals itself at a deliberate pace, each revelation managing to be both unexpected and perfectly calibrated. Morris's gentle questioning of Hideaway frequenter Doyle (Tim Moyer, breaking down beautifully through each of his scenes) in the present, gradually begins to take on weight given to it by the actions of Iris and Woodnut (Griffin Stanton-Ameison, a potent blend of wide-eyed innocence and self-loathing), an undercover agent sent in to infiltrate the Hideaway, in the hopes of ascertaining the location of Sims and the IP server. *The Nether* spends a great deal of its second half pulling all of the rugs out from underneath the audience, all while confronting them unflinchingly with unanswerable questions about identity and culpability. The players established, the mystery shifts, as Sims becomes increasingly obsessed with finding out the identity of the person who controlled Woodnut to find his location. Each relationship, previously established, mutates and changes the audience perception of not only the characters at play, but their actions and the motivations behind them. Doyle shifts from being a seemingly random component, to the axis the events pivot on bolstered by Tim Moyer's deep

sadness and potent desperation, quietly carried through every micro movement. While these mysteries could easily serve as strawmen-flimsy conduits for penetrating debates on the value of pornography, the harm of intent versus action-they remain genuinely captivating in their own right, fueled by flawed and fascinating characters.

The effect of *The Nether*, experienced in its entirety, is akin to a brilliantly executed magic trick, where every participant contributes through subtle suggestion, the moving parts that completes the sleight of hand. The direction of the show allows for a more tangible representation of the complicated question of life within and without of the Nether. **In the present tense, the action is confined to a very small area-essentially a table and two chairs, and the actors never stray far from them. It is claustrophobic and narrow, and the mounting tensions between the characters-particularly Morris and and Sims-weigh heavier because of it.** The cool, measured professionalism Bi Jean Ngo brings to Morris deteriorates so gradually, so plausibly, that the inevitable crash of her composure feels entirely earned and all the more devastating for it. Her scenes with Greg Wood are weighted with the sort of tension-the contrast of her control against his increasingly frantic rage but also her crumbling certitude when faced with his disconcertingly persuasive arguments-that would make a compelling eighty minutes by itself. That would, however, deprive an audience of *The Nether's* finest conceit, a directorial choice that delicately indicts the audience.

**In the Nether, unlike in the present, space is open, beautifully lit and availed entirely. When the actors move outside of the house, they are giddy and childlike.** Emi Branes-Huff plays Iris with all of the reckless enthusiasm of a happy, carefree child, until she goes into the bedroom-which the audience observes through segmented windows. Once inside her room, she is demure, uncertain, more aware of the real intent and purpose of the technicolor world around her. She becomes more adult; confident in a way that Griffin Stanton-Ameison's Woodnut (all twitchy, nervous energy) cannot manage. **The audience is made into voyeurs, as the child becomes a little less so, and the adult steadily loses ground. Given the role of technology in the play, it would be difficult to deny the double meaning of the word "windows", and the implications of the many things that can be seen through them.**

It is, during one of Iris and Woodnut's bedroom trysts, that the weight of watching becomes almost unbearable, as the scene is directed with a slow, methodical build-allowed to breathe and unravel slowly- until an axe comes into play, and the lights mercifully go down, only to come up on the foreground, where Morris is reading an account of what we have not seen to Sims, immediately cancelling out any reprieve the audience may have felt.

To say much more about the plot would be to dilute the overall effect. **The production is across the board exemplary.** Simplicity proves to be a remarkably effective tool for a play so dense with idea and concept. By keeping the present tense set very simple and stark, it keeps the action in a recognizable era, making the vaguely dystopian undertones feel as close and relevant as they in fact are. The impossible wholesomeness of the Hideaway manages to make the action there seem uniquely timeless, despite being a digital construct, and manages to tell you as much about Sims as the architect as any soliloquy ever could.