

The following review appeared in Philadelphia Magazine on March 31, 2016.

# Philadelphia

## ***Nether* at InterAct is a Visceral, Sometimes Creepy Experience**

Jennifer Haley's gripping play is part cyber-thriller, part character study, part science fiction.

By David Fox

"I want to go home," announces Sims, in a tone that implies he's used to getting his way. And why wouldn't he want to leave? A successful businessman, Sims (actor Greg Wood, in a sensationally disquieting performance) is clearly not accustomed to the kind of brutal interrogation he's receiving here, from a relentless detective called Morris (played by Bi Jean Ngo, with dour authority).

But what if the "home" Sims pines for isn't an actual place at all — rather, a fantasyland where away from prying eyes, anything and everything can happen? In *The Nether*, playwright Jennifer Haley imagines a near future when the virtual world has become so sophisticated that it can offer access to pleasure that feels as immersive and — well, real — as the genuine article. This is far beyond the Internet we know, love, and fear. The Nether, as the new web is called, includes, smells, tactile contact... even an element of unpredictability.

Sounds appealing, right? What if I told you that the chief source of Sims' pleasure is a young girl? And that his pleasure involved not only sexual gratification — but also violence?

That's the set up. Sims' virtual home is an idealized Victorian house and garden, where a lovely, preternaturally mature 9-year-old girl named Iris (astonishingly poised child actress Emi Branes-Huff) exists for his every whim. Joining him from time to time is his co-worker Doyle (Tim Moyer, excellent) who also indulges in this life "outside of consequence," as Sims describes it.

Haley's play — part cyber-thriller, part character study, part science fiction — certainly asks big questions. Will we create Avatars that are so sophisticated they develop free will and agency? Is pornography an outlet that provides a "safe space" to indulge sexual fantasies, removed from human interaction, or does it increase desire to turn those fantasies into reality? Has the line between reality and its virtual counterpart become so blurred that it's useless to think of them as separate entities?

The playwright, of course, doesn't have answers. (Does anybody?) Instead, *The Nether* provides a theatrical simulacrum, through which an audience can experience the issues in a visceral, often profoundly creepy way.

It can be a bumpy ride — Haley's best work is the seamless merging of fantasy and reality, and there's a touch of genius in the setting, which is so nostalgically appealing, yet also connects us to Lewis Carroll's Alice and J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan — two other Victorian "innocents." But the interrogation scenes aren't as compelling. The weakest writing falls to Morris, who largely functions as a mouthpiece for a lot of cumbersome exposition.

Still, *The Nether*, smoothly directed at InterAct by Seth Rozin, is a gripping 80 minutes that will give you a lot to think about. Haley has also, probably unknowingly, solved the testy cellphones in theaters problem. A couple of times, I heard those maddening vibrations I associate with "silent" mode. Normally, this is an annoyance — but here, as I wondered what each communication might about, it was positively sinister!