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Philly Leaps into Today

By Aaron Hunt

Have you ever wondered at the fury with which an otherwise mild-mannered child of your acquaintance can pound away with malicious glee as she or he maligns, mangles, or murders glowing bits of data dancing across a computer screen? Now imagine an interactive computer game in which your personal avatar, chosen by someone else, has been placed. You don't have a computer mouse or a keyboard to contribute to the drama. The only rule is that here there are no rules. Jennifer Haley's play, *The Nether* is wildly current, and as provocative as television's *Law & Order: SVU*. InterAct Theatre's decision to present the 2013 sci-fi drama is exactly in keeping with the bit-in-the-teeth theatrical galloping I witnessed in Philly.

InterAct has segmented the former ballroom of Philadelphia's Drake Hotel into two playing spaces, and has taken on four other theatres as "Residential Partners," placing itself directly in the Philly's theatre district, while reapportioning an historic space. Lobbies were still under construction during my visit.

"InterAct is a theatre for today's world, dedicated to commissioning, developing, and producing new and contemporary plays that explore the social, political, and cultural issues of our time," reads the company's mission.

Set in a time so close to possible that we can almost squint and see it, the internet has become "The Nether," with such freedom of choices that the notion of appropriate policing of regions of various realities is called up. In an online place called The Hideway, pedophiles bed and breed children of their choice and then, if it entices them further, dismember their prey. Of course, it is all virtual, and no one is hurt, because the pedophiles are exercising their sexual dementia in a controlled venue, and if all the parents in the world are paying attention, the "children" are other consenting adults, enjoying the game. Right?

Director Seth Rozin's cast of Bi Jean Ngo, Greg Wood, Tim Moyer, Griffin Stanton-Ameisen, and Emi Branes-Huff all commit themselves well, and designers Melpomene Katakalos (scenic), Maria Shaplin (lighting), Janus Stefanowicz (costumes), and Rob Kaplowitz (sound) create individual spaces in which audiences are invited to experience a horrifying sense of complicity.

I find *The Nether* the sort of sparkling conversation that will bring new viewers to our theatres, and convince them that leaving home to get a taste of disconnection from their daily lives by looking at live people on a stage rather than what have become specks of data on a television screen is exciting and viable.

