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'The Nether' at InterAct Theatre Company in Philadelphia

By Tim Dunleavy

Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* is set partly in the near future and partly in the distant past. And in Haley's riveting but frequently disturbing play, each of these eras can be equally dangerous. *The Nether* opens in a police interrogation room where a tough detective named Morris is questioning a man named Mr. Sims about some crimes she suspects him of. Soon the horror of the crimes becomes clear: he's accused of child murder and child molestation, and of enticing others to do the same. The problem is, Sims didn't do it... or at least, he didn't do it in real life. Sims has committed his transgressions not in reality but in the Nether, an online successor to the internet where people move through a virtual reality that envelops them, using all their senses. (Cleverly, Sims' name is the same as one of the world's most popular role-playing games.) It's in the Nether that Sims has created a Victorian-era mansion where even the most gruesome crimes can be committed without compunction; after all, in the Nether, nobody really dies and nobody really gets hurt.

Or do they? "Just because it's virtual doesn't mean it's not real," says Morris. Is Sims' mansion a way for predators to prevent real-life horrors by giving those with grave compulsions a way to indulge themselves without harming others? (Sims, who is quite aware of the risk his impulses pose in the real world – "I am sick and have always been sick and there is no cure," he says – created his online home for this reason.) Or is it, as Morris counters, a risky development that fosters "a culture of legitimization" and will lead to more and more violence? "How can you, in good conscience, infect people with this content?" she asks. Haley's play walks a tightrope. Its very existence seems designed to trigger outrage. At times it wallows in the same perverse culture it condemns. But while it comes close, in the end *The Nether* doesn't feel exploitative. It never shows us any crimes, and it treats the victims, and even the perpetrators, with respect and understanding. Seth Rozin's direction builds tension with precision, moving effortlessly between the severe interrogation scenes and the delicate moments in Sims' home. Even though you never see any sex or violence, every moment is suffused with a sense of impending doom. Everything about the alternate reality is elegant, polite and dignified, yet you can't help feeling that everything in these people's lives is about to careen out of control. It makes for a powerful production.

Set Designer Melpomene Katalalos created the house, an inviting jewel box surrounded with latticework, ivy, and shrubbery that looks like the perfect refuge from the modern world. Maria Shaplin's lighting contrasts the sunniness of the fantasy scenes with harsh, distant overhead spotlights for the interrogation scenes. And Janus Stefanowicz's costumes vary from Morris' sleek black business ensemble to fanciful vests and a broad-lapelled topcoat for the Victorian scenes. Greg Wood excels at showing the two sides of Mr. Sims – the grace and magnanimity of his online version, and the tightly coiled fury of his real side. Tim Moyer plays another suspect, and his slouched, disheveled appearance lets you know how much having his private life pried into has devastated him. Griffin Stanton-Ameisen has the perfect light touch as a visitor to the Victorian world who realizes he's in over his head. Bi Jean Ngo is powerful and convincing as the detective who serves as the show's voice of strength and moral indignation. It's too bad for Ngo that her scenes tend to be the least interesting, and that her character is less convincing than the people she's pursuing. For all the play's talk of sexual deviancy, only one moment in *The Nether* made me cringe: when the hard-as-nails Morris breaks down and confesses to someone she barely knew online that "you are my first love, if you can imagine that." By making Morris' own emotional growth so stunted, Haley ends up undermining her most admirable character.