

Nashville Scene

Actors Bridge Ensemble peers into a virtual future with *The Nether*

Nether Regions

By MARTIN BRADY

ARTS AND CULTURE - THEATER

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It's not exactly festive fare, but Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*, currently onstage in its Music City premiere at Actors Bridge Ensemble, is guaranteed to provide the mature, thinking theatergoer with an experience that will last way beyond the current holiday season. Maybe well on into the century.

Haley's play is relatively new, has had some important stagings in New York, London and Los Angeles, and is now starting to make its way into the regions — and no doubt with the startling impact that provoked its early critical praise.

Credit ABE artistic associate Jessika Malone with landing this one to help the company inaugurate its new performance space in the lower level of the Darkhorse Theater. The venue proves to be intimate and art-friendly, though probably will prove to be challenging in terms of usage and play selection. Nevertheless, it's way better than where the company was previously, and it's showcased here in a fashion that is as interesting and surprising as Haley's script — with the main playing areas at far left and right and the wide expanse of center space mostly functioning as a kind of actorly way station, with the audience seated in between along the sides. Fact is, through its 20-year history, ABE has thrived in alternative performing spaces, so the more things change, etc.

With that setup, we enter *The Nether* as futuristic customers, ushered in by the "offline" staff of the Internet Cafe Limbo, issued "credentials" that afford access to the show's program via smartphone (finally, the paperless society!) and also a couple of drinks, and then cautioned about staying within the boundaries of the seating area.

Sufficiently programmed, we dutifully witness a tale concerning an online world, an almost complete virtual reality, engendered by advanced technology and as easy as X-Box: Just log in, choose an identity and indulge your fantasy for hours. Yet we are well beyond *Halo*, *Call of Duty* or *Madden NFL*. Here the hot game is consensual role-play — what one character considers the equivalent of "blowing off steam" — and where a life without consequences can be achieved even, we learn, if depravity might be a menu option.

In Haley's future world, expect chemical castration if you act out offline. But online? Anything goes. Can bots cry real tears? Can they feel pain? And what of elf sex? These are only some of the outré questions provoked by an investigation instigated by a detective named Morris (Vali Forrister), intent on revealing the true nature of a realm called The Hideaway, owned by an older gentleman named Sims (Rodney Pickel), aka "Poppa."

Sims' suspect activities involve a 9-year-old girl named Iris (Robin August Fritsch), and Morris conducts tense interrogations of Sims and another fellow named Doyle (Phil Perry), a noted physics teacher. Meanwhile, at the other end of the theater, at The Hideaway — where security is so protective that even the admins don't know who is entering — we meet young Iris and a virtual customer named Woodnut (Bralyn Stokes).

No spoilers here, of course. But suffice it to say that Haley's tautly crafted 80-minute piece is a perfectly au courant discussion-starter for the modern audience, transporting us to the three-way crossroads of technology, human desire and morality. Malone smartly shepherds her cast — including the remarkably poised 12-year-old Fritsch — through the author's economical but well-loaded dialogue, extracting wonderfully moody performances from all.

On the technical end, Hilary Frame has created some striking costumes that range from gently simple to futuristically regimented, and ace lighting designer Richard K. Davis works the show's murky theme with appropriately atmospheric results.

Meanwhile, last Saturday evening's performance offered a selection of reference points — intended and otherwise —

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PHOTO: WESLEY DUFFEE-BRAUN

The Nether
Presented by Actors Bridge Ensemble

Through Dec. 13 at
Darkhorse Chapel, 4610
Charlotte Ave.

that served as reminders of just how deeply we are all entrenched in the digital revolution, like it or not. The character-name Sims recalls the groundbreaking life-simulation video game series, still going strong apparently. And when Morris announces she is "seeking the location of the server," it is impossible not to be reminded of a certain presidential candidate's recent technical State Department problems. Finally, we can't not report that a cellphone went off about halfway through the show — someone didn't get the message from offline staff? — and the linkage from our gadgety world to playwright Haley's seemed strangely reaffirmed.

A very worthwhile and quite serious post-show talk-back helped reassure — to all who stayed for it — that human feelings still matter. As do right and wrong. For now, anyway.

The production continues — for real — through the weekend.

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