

Actors Bridge delivers darkly compelling 'Nether'

Amy Stumpf, For The Tennessean 1:21 p.m. CST December 5, 2015



(Photo: Wesley Duffee-Braun)

Jennifer Haley's award-winning thriller "The Nether" (<http://www.thenetherplay.com/>) is certainly not the first play to tackle the ethics of technology and its impact on society. But it may be the most unsettling.

And under the direction of Company Artistic Associate Jessika Malone, [Actors Bridge Ensemble](http://actorsbridge.org/) (<http://actorsbridge.org/>)'s current production takes us on a wildly provocative ride, that poses serious questions about thought crime, the right to privacy and the very concept of identity.

Set in the not-so-distant future, we find that the Internet has evolved into a vast network of virtual realms called the Nether. Here, people are encouraged to abandon dreary reality and indulge their darkest desires. But when a hard-hitting investigator named Detective Morris discovers a particularly disturbing realm called the Hideaway, she finds herself in uncharted ethical territory.

Haley's script allows for great flexibility, and Malone takes the theatrical ball and runs with it. She and Technical Director Mitch Massaro have transformed the cozy Darkhorse Chapel into a futuristic internet cafe. Audience members are issued credentials upon entering the theater, and face one another across a traverse stage.

For the next 80 minutes, we follow Morris' investigation, as she digs into the shady realms of the Nether. Massaro's scenic design is smart and efficient, allowing the action to flow in a most organic way. And Richard K. Davis' lighting is evocative without feeling kitschy.



Actors Bridge Ensemble presents "The Nether" Dec. 4-13. (Photo: Wesley Duffee-Braun)

But Malone really secured the success of this production in the casting process. It's always a treat to see ABE Producing Artistic Director Vali Forrister on stage, but she tears into the role of Detective Morris with particular relish. She thunders away at her "suspects," but it's in more quiet moments that she reveals her character's true struggle.

Rodney Pickel makes an outstanding ABE debut as Mr. Sims, a man who believes it is possible to live a virtual life where actions have no consequence. Pickel faces off with Forrister in grand style, but he also lends his character just enough tenderness to make us squirm.

Phil Perry turns in some of his strongest work to date as Mr. Doyle, a tragic soul unable to find peace in either the real or virtual world. His final moments on stage are truly heartbreaking. Bralyn Stokes also succeeds as the charming Mr. Woodnut, who develops an unexpected connection at the Hideaway.

But the performance that really caught me off guard was that of young Robin August Fritsch. As Iris — a virtual child offered up to the Hideaway's guests — she is at once winsome and pensive. It's difficult to reveal more without spoiling the story, but suffice to say the depth of this well-crafted performance belies her youth.

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Dark, challenging but totally intriguing, "The Nether" marks another notable achievement for Actors Bridge — and one that's guaranteed to keep Nashville talking.

If you go

What: Actors Bridge Ensemble presents "The Nether"

When: Through December 13. Performances at 7 p.m., Thursdays-Sundays.

1/18/16, 10:17 PM

Tickets: \$25 (\$30 at the door)

Contact: <https://thenether.eventbrite.com> (<https://t.e2ma.net/click/qalnh/6q4i7g/u1obxb>)

• Intended for mature audiences; no one under 13 admitted without parent or guardian.

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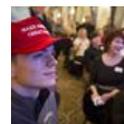
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