

Gamm Theatre's 'The Nether' delves into dark side of the internet

Wednesday

Posted Mar 1, 2017 at 9:00 PM

Moral choices and their justifications are at the core of play that explores pace of technology.

By Keith PowersSpecial to The Journal

PAWTUCKET, R.I. — The real world has rules. The virtual world? TBD.

Jennifer Haley's "The Nether," onstage beginning Thursday at the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre in Pawtucket, tackles meaning, morality and the consequences of interactions in the virtual world. Set in the undefined future, "The Nether" (Haley's phrase for the futuristic internet) seems to offer risk-free sensory opportunities — until it doesn't.

Judith Swift directs "The Nether," which had its debut in 2012 in Los Angeles and has seen multiple productions, including off-Broadway and on London's West End. Richard Donnelly stars as Sims (and Papa, his online avatar), Casey Seymour Kim as Morris, Jim O'Brien as Doyle, Ally Gower as Iris and Jamie Dufault as Woodnut.

This play could shock. In "The Nether," there exists The Hideaway. A virtual pleasure dome, customers can find all manner of entertainment in The Hideaway — with virtual reality characters — free from guilt (presumably) and restraints. And certainly free from the meddling eyes of law enforcement.

But some crimes are too heinous, even if they happen in the virtual world.

"Haley creates a world where individuals who have compulsions can follow them," Swift says. "One character, Sims (who runs The Hideaway), argues that technology and virtual reality have created a world where there are no more taboos."

The time of the action in "The Nether" is unclear, "but certainly some dystopian nightmare has occurred," Swift says. "We don't know what it is, but beauty and nature only exist in virtual reality, in The Hideaway. I think the playwright does a nice job of looking at a lot of the things being said by futurists."

Describing the future, and being prepared for it, are two different things though. "We're reaching it without talking about it," Swift says. "The moral choices in 'The Nether' are like a battle cry. When we can replicate the human brain, does the machine brain need us anymore? The answer is no. Are we genetically encoded to need community?"

"The Nether" isn't just focused on the moral choices, but the justifications that characters use to make them. One central issue in "The Nether" involves sexual relations with children. Uniformly considered a repugnant notion, the existence of such relations in the virtual reality of the play is argued in more nuanced fashion.

"A character can say, 'In The Hideaway it's OK to have sexual relations with children, because I'm keeping myself from harming them in the real world.' I think Haley makes compelling arguments on both sides of this issue."

The pace of technology, juxtaposed with our ability to comprehend it, remains at the philosophical core of the play.

"A lot has happened, even in 10 years, and the world has changed significantly," Swift says. "I can remember getting my first Apple desktop computer back in the '80s. People said, 'What could you possibly want with that?'"

"In this play, you'll find yourself sympathizing with things you would never expect," Swift says. "People may find it disturbing. Others may find it enlightening. I think the most important thing is that you should walk in with an open mind."

If you go

What: "The Nether"

Where: Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, 172 Exchange St., Pawtucket

When: March 2-26

Tickets: \$33 previews (through Sunday); \$44 and \$52

Information: (401) 723-4266, gammtheatre.org
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— *Keith Powers covers music and the arts for the GateHouse papers and WBUR's The ARTery. On Twitter at [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith).*

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