

Theater Review: Gamm's 'The Nether' falls short

Wednesday

Posted Mar 8, 2017 at 9:00 PM

Unrealistic dialogue hampers play's examination of morality in a virtual world.

By Keith PowersSpecial to The Journal

PAWTUCKET, R.I. — Jennifer Haley's "The Nether," onstage now at the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, posits a world where the virtual competes favorably with the real. Set post-apocalyptically, The Nether (the futuristic internet) allows for any online fantasy.

Including those of sadistic pedophiles. Sadistic pedophiles who justify their virtual actions, claiming that what they do in The Nether keeps them from harming children in real life.

It's a brilliant premise, full of ethical complexities. Now Haley just needs a brilliant play to explore those complexities.

"The Nether," directed by Judith Swift, stars Richard Donnelly as Sims (or virtually as Papa), who has created The Hideaway, his personal paradise with tasteful Victorian decor, seasonal gardens and willing, vulnerable little girls.

It's creepy — shiveringly so — but Sims justifies it by claiming that no real children are involved. His virtual ones have sex with adults, get dismembered by adults, then bounce cheerfully back for more.

The real authorities don't see it his way. An investigation by Morris (Casey Seymour Kim) digs into Sims' motives, revealing along the way falsehoods on all sides (including her own). Double identity roles from Jim O'Brien, Ally Gower and Jamie Dufault muddy the ethical waters.

No spoilers here. As a whodunit, "The Nether" is built for success. But as a sophisticated look into issues of virtual morality, "The Nether" falls far short.

The players work the script for all it's got, and Swift has them prepared to examine any possible nuances. It's the believability of the situation that falls short. The ideas are greater than the execution.

Morris' procedural never seems official; she's excessively invested emotionally from the start, and her PI persona feels overwrought. We never believe she's just pursuing some "truth."

Sims fares better. He's a sophist, for sure. He's not just living out fantasies virtually; his Hideaway has invited guests, and his virtual victims are constantly reminded of his "rules." When they're bad, they go to "boarding school," never to be seen again.

A lot of the language of "The Nether" falls short in positing the situation. The play gets off to a slow start, before we realize that we're alternating between Sims and Morris in the interrogation room, and Sims and his fantasies in the Hideaway. To make up for some unrealistic dialogue, the players are forced to contrive heightened emotions. Much of that happens too abruptly.

"The Nether" has untapped potential. On another night, the players might be able to bring its premise to life more sensibly. Unfortunately, most of the time it just doesn't seem real.

If you go

What: "The Nether"

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

When: Through March 26

Tickets: \$44 and \$52

Information: (401) 723-4266, gammtheatre.org

— 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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