

Dobama Theatre more than keeps up with ‘The Realistic Joneses’

REVIEWED BY BOB ABELMAN

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From left, Chris Richards (John), Joel Hammer (Bob), Tracee Patterson (Jennifer), and Rachel Zake (Pony).

Photo / Steve Wagner Photography

In Will Eno’s “Middletown,” which was staged by Dobama Theatre in 2012, we were introduced to the small New England community of Grover’s Corners, whose population consisted of impulsive, stream of consciousness self-disclosers with no filter and no off-button.

The chatty citizens of this township shared every random observation, nagging anxiety, and metaphysical thought that popped into their heads. They casually pondered the vast mysteries of existence and the morbidity that lies beneath it as if discussing the weather.

If you listened closely, diligently and patiently – always a wise choice during any Dobama Theatre production – the playwright’s clever wordplay and subtle punch lines gave way to weighty and intriguing insights into the human condition and the ways of the world.



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Eno’s love of language and penchant for using it is immediately evident in his newest work, “The Realistic Joneses,” which left Broadway in 2014 and is currently being performed at Dobama.

The four characters in this playful and poignant one-act tragi-comedy are as likely to ramble and free associate as those residing in “Middletown,” and their simple observations also have big picture applications. But their use of words serves a different and higher purpose: To demonstrate their inadequacy. Words fail these people when they need them most.

The play starts with Jennifer Jones (Tracee Patterson) turning to her husband Bob (Joel Hammer), who is dying from something called Harriman Leavey Syndrome, and stating: “It just seems like we don’t talk.”

On the contrary, this middle-aged couple speak incessantly. But words just don’t capture the extent of Bob’s pain or relay the frustration of having an irreversible and degenerative nerve disease that impacts his short-term memory and word formation. And words just can’t convey Jennifer’s pain of loving someone who is dying or express the frustration of caring for him.

The neighbors John Jones (Chris Richards) and his wife Pony (Rachel Zake), a young couple who just moved to this semi-rural mountain town, have problems with words as well. Pony lacks the wherewithal to find the right words to express her feelings and John tends to speak in bizarre non sequiturs and hilarious self-contradictions. So he talks a lot but says very little.

The two couples first meet in the backyard of Bob and Jennifer's house, which is cleverly represented by a free-standing sliding screen door with a fabric backdrop showing a mountain range in the distance. The set, designed by Laura Carlson Tarantowski, doubles as John and Pony's house and, with some dramatic shifts in lighting by Marcus Dana, serves as every other location. There's a gapping fissure running down the mountain and extending to the Jones' backyard, so there is no doubt that their world is falling apart and crumbling beneath their feet.

There is no substantive plot, per se, in "The Realistic Joneses," and there's little realism save for the Joneses just trying to get through the day. This can be infuriating for the smattering of staunch defenders of traditional storytelling in the audience, who still seem surprised by the range of Dobama Theatre's offerings.



In their defense, the playwright's idiosyncratic tendencies and despairing views of existence, albeit shrouded in deliciously dark humor, can certainly be difficult to digest. Eno is not easy.

But director Shannon Sindelar knows full well that there is much to salvage and savor in Eno's brilliant wordplay and complex characters, and her actors facilitate the process with their considerable talent and astounding dexterity.

Everyone succeeds in finding warmth and distinctiveness in their respective Joneses. The raw vulnerability that Patterson and Zake bring to their characters makes it possible for us to care deeply about their struggles, relate to their inability to find the right words when they need them most, and rejoice in their few moments of calm, clarity and connection.

And there's something so very touching about the undercurrent of fear that resides just below Hammer's droll and very funny delivery of Bob's lines, most of which are brutally honest expressions of his inner-most thoughts. It's not easy to have the audience's sympathy when you dismiss your company by blurting out "you have to leave so I can do to bed," as Bob does in the opening scene of the play.

The manner by which Richards reveals John's own malady, by subtly and methodically undermining the character's façade of quirky self-assuredness, is remarkable. Although it is heart-wrenching watching John have a neurological episode late in the play, it is enthralling watching Richards build to that moment.

Those willing to listen closely, diligently and patiently to this regional premiere production of this truly intriguing and entertaining play will find it worth their while, if not for the cleverness of the material than for the brilliance of its execution.

WHAT: "The Realistic Joneses"

WHERE: Dobama Theatre, 2340 Lee Rd., Cleveland Hts.

WHEN: Through Feb. 14

TICKETS & INFO: \$25 – \$28. Call 216-932-3396 or visit dobama.org.

