

Theatre Review: 'The Providence of Neighboring Bodies' at Ars Nova Theatre

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Lori Parquet and Amy Staats. Photo Credit: Alley Scott

The Dutch Kills Theatre Company presents “The Providence of Neighboring Bodies” by Jean Ann Douglass – an astounding piece of theatre! Powerful text, strong direction, brilliant design, and phenomenal performances. Just had to say that upfront. It’s so smart and heartbreaking and agonizing.

| . . . a brilliant satirical metaphor. . .

We’re in North Providence, Rhode Island looking onto the balconies of two adjacent apartments. It’s Saturday. Dora is in an ecstatic frenzy about going out onto her balcony to strike up a conversation with her neighbor Ronnie, an English school teacher. Ronnie is off trying to take pictures of flowers of mason jars to improve her online couch rental listing, and Dora is deflated by her absence and resorts to caffeine binging.

But later, Ronnie returns to engage in the dance of starting a new, unexpected friendship across the gap in the balcony railings. Nothing and absolutely everything happens in their self-deconstructing reflections. They are talking at one another, past one another – obsessed with their own place in the world and the effect they are having on others. In an instant, they are thrown together in a secret, a silent pact that will have severe ramifications later on.

Their universe is small, anorexic of life experience, and they are desperate for enduring connection. But then Jane

arrives, Ronnie's first house guest, and brings some sunshine and fresh air with her optimistic outlook. Dora and Ronnie are catapulted into being welcoming hosts. These new roles force new aspects of themselves to emerge in response to the interesting stranger in the midst.

Jane is looking for her ancestral stomping ground, tracing her lineage to these parts, but faces hostility from the Rhode Island inhabitants as she goes on her quest around town. Dora and Ronnie are unaware of Jane's troubles and are more concerned about their own enjoyment at having her in their lives. Then there is the confession note, the police at the door, and the sad climax.

Jean Ann Douglass has written a sophisticated text that sees each character speaking an inner exposition as "dialogue" with the other characters. Their self-narration of their inner thoughts makes for compulsive viewing. They are speaking subtext as conversation whilst deconstructing and analyzing their every response to other people in their environments.

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We find out so much about each character in a short space of time, and it's extremely satisfying. It's almost like viewing people talking as they "think" as opposed to how they "speak." We go down rabbit holes with them in their thought patterns. Douglass' writing is remarkable – delivering characters and plot lines that are so relevant for 2017 and our desire to engage in extreme "othering."

Director Jess Chayes has crafted an exquisite gem full of nuanced moments and potent character interactions. Her gifted hand can be seen in the clever staging and perfectly paced tension lines between the character's inner turmoil and outward facade.

Lori Parquet as Dora has the most sensational ability to visualize and take you along for the ride. Her eyes are more captivating than Kaa the snake in the "Jungle Book." She totally hypnotizes you with her visual gaze. You can read every emotion and thought in her dilated pupils. She played the sensual, self-absorbed Dora with hedonistic pleasure and commanded the space with her vitality.

Amy Staats as Ronnie was brilliantly neurotic. It felt like she might spontaneously combust from all of the pent up repressed energy she has been weighed with for her entire life. She played a fantastic tight, held counterpoint to Dora's languidness. Staats is a magnetic performer that has created a heartbreaking character that's on the very edge of the cliff, about to snap and leap off. I loved the interplay between these two powerhouse actresses.

Dinah Berkeley as Jane was a quirky, instantaneously lovable character. Berkeley gave us a well-observed physical characterization for Jane with a great ability to play the melancholy under the sunny façade. She was totally engaging in the role of the outsider, trying hard to fit in with her cheerful disposition and heartbreaking naivety.

Carolyn Mraz's set design was exceptional. She created the perfect world for these characters to "sit in." You felt like you were right there on the balcony looking over Rhode Island, seeing far into the bleak distance.

This is an intelligent production that has stayed with me. It trains a magnifying glass on to the nature of isolation that breeds both a fascination and fear around anything that might cause inconvenience in the un-lived life. We are going to see a tsunami of work in the theatre that will try to make sense of the trend towards isolationism and the "us and them" fear mongering that is running riot.

"The Providence of Neighboring Bodies" (*love this title*) tackles these reactionary principles in a brilliant satirical metaphor that will ensure its longevity as a defining text.

Running Time: 1 hour and 20 minutes, with no intermission.

"The Providence of Neighboring Bodies" is currently playing through March 11, 2017 at Ars Nova Theatre in New

York, NY. For more information and tickets, click [here](#).