

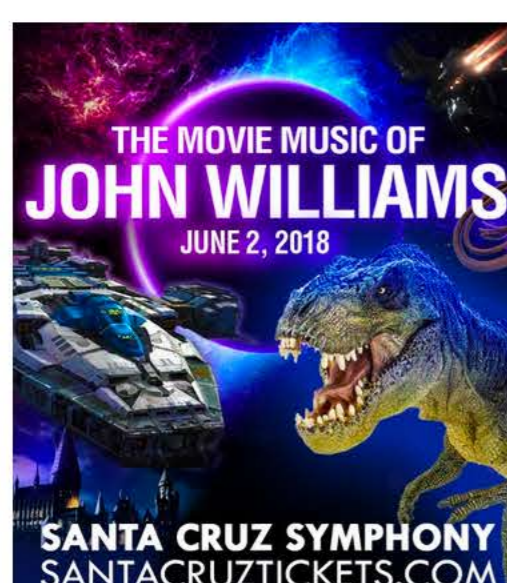
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CATEGORY ARCHIVES: THEATER REVIEWS

## The Realistic Joneses

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By Jocelyn McMahon

IN THE PERFECTLY TRIMMED yard outside a lovely blue house the Joneses, Bob and Jennifer, are enjoying a nice quiet evening in their lawn chairs, talking about, well, not talking. The couple takes pleasure in their usual banter until they hear a crash from the garbage can. Assuming it is a raccoon, or something of the sort, they go to investigate, but instead find a young couple standing there. They are the new neighbors, the OTHER Joneses, John and Pony, who have just moved into the identical blue house next door. How American.

Will Eno's *The Realistic Joneses* is a bold but strong choice for Actors' Theatre first ever expanded season. Directed by Gerry Gerringer, the play, which ran on Broadway in 2014, has an unusual quirky humor that grabs the audience's attention immediately and maintains a certain uncomfortable, but engaged dynamic, that is often felt with the company's annual 8 Tens @ 8 Festival.

The two couples, the Joneses, who we initially assume to be classic suburban character sketches, quickly turn into beasts of their own kind. We are left thinking *who the heck are these people?* Immediately their lives begin to intertwine as they quickly come to know each other, perhaps a little more than they would have liked. Soon all hell breaks loose as their relationships entangle and the characters discover they cannot face—or runaway from—their realities.

We see the chemistry between Jennifer (Tara McMilin) and John (Drew Crocker) clearly established in the second scene where they meet by chance at the grocery store and experience a bit of mild flirtation. Over the course of the show their connection grows, and eventually their relationship becomes more of a parental dynamic. They find solace in one another. Just as Jennifer is always there for her sick husband who seems indifferent and emotionally unavailable, John struggles to convey his concerns and emotions to his wife who doesn't really want to take any responsibility for her husband.

Meanwhile Pony (Sarah Marsh) is fighting the feeling that she hasn't achieved anything in life, and, despite moving house, is still unhappy. Bob (Avondina Wills) struggles to maintain his dignity and sense of being a man while being unable to work, and experiencing mental and physical impairments. The two, not really having anyone else to turn to, soon become companions, or possibly more.

The stage set, two identical blue houses with back-doors connected by mirroring patios lined with detailed props, opens a portal into the lives of the two pairs of Joneses. And the tech, although minimal, is solid. (I would have considered some background music between transitions, or before or after curtain call.) The impeccable lighting cues drive one my favorite scenes; the night Bob is caught in a motion-activated floodlight in John and Pony's backyard. Flip flopping between complete dark and light, Crocker and Wills convey the absurd humor of the of the moment picking perfect tableaux for the lights to come up on.

The acting choices, on the other hand, are a bit of a mixed bag. Wills' Bob is sassy and makes it clear what he really means: cut the BS. Wills' frank, one-word answers are great, and lend relief from the suburban babble written into the dialogue. His deadpan punchlines are some of the most humorous of the show, and later when we see strains of his vulnerability sneak in under his tough guy persona his character fights to maintain, it is hard not to be sympathetic.

Tara McMilin beautifully conveys the concern and sincerity, as well as the frustration and pain that her character Jennifer is experiencing. By far the strongest point in the show comes near the end, in Jennifer's monologue directed at her husband, when she finally breaks under the pressure of being underappreciated.

Drew Crocker's portrayal of John is initially awkward and uncomfortable, perhaps intentionally, but as the show progresses he sheds his awkward persona and we come to understand his underlying character and see a different side of him, especially with the more intimate scenes with Jennifer.

The performance by Sarah Marsh as Pony, unfortunately, offers no subtlety, which, even for a comedy, is at times necessary. Her pacing is so fast that moments are missed and there is no chance for a beat to fall in order for the punchline to sustain meaning. It would have been nice to be able to enjoy her key monologue in Act Two, which really has much potential.

Even though the comedic elements dominate the show, I would have liked to see more moments of sincerity, especially when dealing with subject matters such as mortality and terminal illness (you'll have to see the show to understand what I'm talking about). The play overall conveys an accurate look at the younger suburban couple looking for solace in the seemingly "wiser" older couple, who, it turns out, don't know what they're doing either. Both pairs of Joneses love each other unconditionally, though they may not always like each other. Or as Pony accurately explains: "It's not easy. Sometimes I can only handle half a person."

Though *The Realistic Joneses* is mostly entertaining, I was left wondering what we the audience are supposed to take away? Is it a snapshot of the struggles and emotional rewards of love and maintaining a long-term relationship? A comment on the distance between us despite living so compactly? An internal glimpse into the seemingly perfect picturesque suburban America? The silliness and absurdity, which is great at certain moments, gets carried away and leaves the depth of the show to be swept under the rug.