

A CRITIC'S TAKE



PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED

'The Realistic Joneses' runs Fridays to Sundays through June 3 at Center Stage in Santa Cruz.

'Realistic Joneses' offers laughs

By Joanne Englehardt

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Whoa, Nellie! If you want to see a play that makes (almost) no sense yet is crazy funny and engrossing, then "The Realistic Joneses" is the play for you. It's running through June 3 at Center Stage Theater in Santa Cruz and it's guaranteed to make you walk out thinking, "Huh?"

What was playwright Will Eno thinking? Better yet, what are the four Joneses in the play thinking?

Director Gerry Geringer clearly keeps up with Eno's strangely lyrical yet nonsensical dialogue and he found four actors who wondrously preserve the pyrotechnics of those words.

Yes, the audience gets a tad seasick as this quartet frolics, trudges, oozes and undresses (sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively), but if you listen carefully, you'll hear pleas for the universal needs of all humanity: loneliness, unrequited love, fear, joy, laughter.

For most of the evening, Bob and Jennifer Jones (a heart-wrenching Avondina Wills and a compassionate, deeply felt performance by Tara McMilin) try to be the grownups as their youngish new neighbors Pony and John (a kooky, innocent-looking Sarah Marsh and a dynamic, no-holds-barred acting job by Drew Crocker) impulsively hide behind garbage cans before revealing themselves, pulling up folding chairs and making themselves at home in Bob and Jenni-



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fer's back yard.

But all is forgiven because ... well, they brought a bottle of wine which, strangely, never gets opened. As the two couples chat, first Pony, then John ask to use their bathrooms, again somewhat puzzling because their own home is about 20 feet away.

Such is the ebb-and-flow of Eno's very unorthodox play. Yet there are occasional touches of poignancy, even sadness, but usually they are followed by such quirky situations and conversations that it's hard to see the drama.

Never mind. When you've got a play as buoyantly charming as this one, it's best to just go with that flow.

Here are a couple of the

non-sequiturs that may cause you to think you missed part of the conversation:

Jennifer: "Do you have kids?"

Pony: "No, but John hates stupid children."

John: "You have a lot of composure."

Jennifer: "Thank you."

John: "I didn't mean it as a compliment."

Pony: "I'm only attracted to half a person. I wish I could focus."

John: "I have a plan that doesn't sound like me."

So, best to keep up with the Joneses, so to speak, because they talk idiosyncratically most of the time.

While all of the performances are top-notch, Crocker is superb to the

IF YOU GO

What: The Realistic Joneses

When: Fridays–Sundays through June 3

Where: Center Stage, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz

Tickets: \$25 general; \$23 senior/student

Details: www.sccat.org

point that you don't want him to stop talking. He's got that loopy smile a la Will Farrell, a sublimely innocent face and the ability to deliver zingers without seemingly knowing what he's doing. He does.

But of course a play is more than those who are on stage. MarNae Taylor's set design is right on — Bob and Jennifer's meticulous, upscale backyard replete with a nice barbecue, patio chairs, a large sunburst sculpture on the wall, well-tended plants and an ornate screen door. By contrast, Pony and John's backyard looks rather ordinary: an unadorned screen door, a few succulent plants and a tiny table and ordinary chairs.

Erik Gandolfi's sound design is well balanced and clear, Carina Swanberg's lighting makes the entire set easy to see and Bonnie Ronzio efficiently runs the sound and light board

So, basically, that's all you need to know. It's a wild-and-crazy show — really well acted and impossible not to like even if you leave the theater wondering what the heck you just saw. The overall tone and aura of "Joneses" is skewed toward irrational absurdity. Enjoy it for what it is.