

# the NETHER

by Jennifer Haley

RTW *renaissance*  
THEATERWORKS

## Audience Guide

FROM ARTISTIC  
DIRECTOR  
SUZAN FETE

I've wanted to produce *The Nether* since I first read it in 2013. I waited for just the right season and the right director to bring this brilliant & challenging work to life. And I'm so glad I waited. A.I. has come of age in 2024. Every day the media cites new breakthroughs in A.I. achievements: cancer research, robotics learning and the advent of realistic video creation. A.I. is on everyone's mind in a way it wasn't 12 years ago.

Part police procedural, part Sci-fi thriller, *The Nether* causes us to contemplate some wild, reality-bending concepts that are straight outta Philip Dick or *Black Mirror*, all while tackling the largest questions of our day: the social ramifications of environmental devastation, the challenging landscape of A. I. and the universal need for human connection. *The Nether* has won numerous awards (Susan Smith Blackburn Award, Francesca Primus Prize, 7 Ovation Awards and 4 Olivier nominations). It has been wildly successful in multiple national and international productions.



Elyse Edelman is the perfect choice for director. She brings an insightful compassionate heart to everything she does. I knew that *The Nether* needed a smart and thoughtful director to bring it to fruition and I immediately thought of Elyse.

RTW is thrilled to bring this brilliant story to our smart, intrepid audiences. You are always up for the challenge!

### Spoiler Alert Pages 2-4.



Suzan Fete  
Artistic Director  
Renaissance Theaterworks

## EXPLORING THE NETHER

By Jayne Regan Pink

**\*\*Contains Spoilers\*\***

**Nether Definition O.E.D\*:** lying or believed to lie beneath the earth's surface, infernal, the nether regions, a dimension of evil or imagination.

**Avatar Definition O.E.D\*:** 1986 Computing and Science Fiction. A graphical representation of a person or character, in a computer generated environment, game or setting that can interact with other characters. 1784 Hinduism. The bodily form of a god on earth.

\*The Oxford English Dictionary

Jennifer Haley's work delves into ethics in virtual reality and the impact of technology on our human relationships, identities and desires. It sits comfortably with other contemporary narratives that address the opportunities and challenges emerging from the evolution of virtuality, such as the online role-playing game *Second Life* (2003), Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One*, or the British TV series *Black Mirror*, and the American TV series *Westworld*, among others.

Like these other narratives, the plot of *The Nether* points towards a paradigm shift in our conception of virtual reality and suggests the need for new terminology to reflect more accurately the nature of computer-generated worlds as well as their relationship to material reality. What sets *The Nether* apart is its medium, which underscores the importance of embodiment in thinking about the ethics of virtual reality, reaffirming the relevance of theater in the discussion of technology.

Rather than writing a moral play, Haley chose to address pedophilia from a variety of angles. In so doing, she aimed for an ethical approach that resists closure and encourages critical thinking. A police procedural play, *The Nether* compels us to contemplate the future of legal practices in dealing with crimes that differ from what we know, starting with a more thoughtful reflection on digital agents and a more open attitude to inhuman subjects.

### **Dystopian Utopia**

As a digital environment that accommodates pedophiles, our location (the Hideaway) harbors a community of sexual deviants and provides them with a site in which conventional moral and social norms are reversed. The exhilarating feeling of freedom and inclusion when one is accepted into a closely knit community is not the only reason that entices people to pay a substantial sum for an immersive experience in the Hideaway. The realm is alluring also because of its beauty, to which the real world no longer measures up: a dystopian utopia. It is revealed that, for some unknown cause, grass has become a luxury in the real world and trees no longer exist. The audience gets a glimpse of this reality through the cold, barely furnished interrogation room, an emblem of a world now reduced to a barren environment. By contrast, the colorful scenery of the Hideaway, full of light, trees and details, offers much a more idealistic beauty. The shift in stage settings between the two worlds acts as a visual cue to the spectator, pointing to the actual world in which events are taking place. Scenography, in a similar fashion, helps the spectator distinguish between digital subjects (avatars) and in-world subjects, even though they are both played by real actors.

## Beyond virtual reality

The Hideaway turns out to be an online realm where people with sexual deviance like Sims can be their true selves (without causing harm to real children), while the selves they display to the real world are but a performance, a falsifying scheme constructed and maintained to conform to social conventions and moral standards. The subjects' avatars in the Hideaway are no less real than their conventional selves in the material world. Since the participants value the experience and relationships they have in the virtual world more than those taking place in non-virtual society, the realness of virtuality can no longer be discarded. Taking it one step further is what best characterizes Sims' intention when he created the Hideaway. "His code is the closest anyone has come to perfecting the art of sensation."

Judging from recent technological developments, it is just a matter of time before something like the Hideaway comes into existence. The entertainment industries and everyday gadgets no longer focus on producing digital representations but rather on the design of digital environments where real and digital bodies are superimposed. At this point, it appears that the term *virtual reality* is no longer adequate to describe the Hideaway, if by *virtual* we mean digital representations that exist solely in a computer-generated environment. It is, therefore, necessary to come up with new terminology to describe this paradigm shift. The concept of *mixed reality*, as an alternative for *virtual reality* facilitates a more accurate understanding of our relation to cyber technologies, in which material bodies, their virtual representations, the human imagination, and computer hardware and software all interact to produce a reality that has both *material* and *virtual* elements.

## The Characters, and the themes

### 1. SIMS/PAPA: Online ethics, anonymity and consequences

Sims is an in-world businessman and his avatar is Papa - the proprietor of "The Hideaway" in the Nether. Sims recognizes that he is a pedophile and, in an attempt to control his desires and protect children from harm, he establishes a virtual reality business where "guests" can live out their sexual and violent fantasies on child avatars. He promotes his enterprise as: "An opportunity to live outside of consequence."

### 2. IRIS: Consent, image & the impact of environmental degradation

Iris is a pre-pubescent girl avatar in The Hideaway. **Spoiler:** *She encourages Papa's "guests" to have sex with her and then kill her.*

During her first encounter with Woodnut she says: "It's okay to do that here, Mr. Woodnut. It's okay to forget who you think you are. And discover who you might be." Iris is one of several characters expressing a longing for a natural world she can no longer access, which speaks to our very real climate crisis, as more than a cautionary tale.

## **The Characters, and the themes (con't)**

### 3. MORRIS: Permission, censorship and freedom of speech

Morris is a young detective investigating Sims and his Nether Hideaway. She presents a counter argument to Sims' promotion of a consequence-free virtual existence. In speaking about The Hideaway and the violent and pedophilic acts encouraged there she says: "You foster a culture of legitimization, telling them their desires are not only acceptable, but commendable."

### 4. WOODNUT: Relationships, disconnection & alienation

Woodnut is an avatar guest at The Hideaway. He spends time with Papa and develops a relationship with Iris. He is one of the characters who illuminates the play's themes of disconnection and alienation and provokes big questions about the impact of online usage on our interpersonal relationships. In the second half of the play he reveals to Sims that his father: "never looked at me when I was a child. He never touched me. He never took me outside."

### 5. DOYLE: Freedom, addiction, and mental health

Cedric Doyle is a 65 year old middle-school science teacher. He has a wife and adult daughter but he spends a great deal of time in the Nether at the Hideaway as his avatar. Morris interrogates Doyle as a key part of her investigation, and convinces him to obtain crucial information from Sims/Papa.

## **A Note on the casting of minor actors in provocative plays.**

"It is recommended to cast the role of Iris with an actor who will appear on stage as a prepubescent girl. The child actor takes the audience out of the play in a way that is desirable considering the content of her scenes. The audience is assured nothing awful will be enacted upon a child. A young actor also adds warmth which is critical to the chemistry of the play."

-Production Note from THE NETHER Playwright, Jennifer Haley.

In the interest of full disclosure I'm a (slightly) oversensitive parent and a former pediatric nurse. The welfare and comfort of children cast is always top of mind, particularly when they are part of a RTW production. Audition process: Iris auditions were open to select First Stage students. The script and all pertinent information was made available to girls and their families prior to the audition. Once the two actors were chosen the director, Elyse Edelman, and I both met with the girls and their parents to ensure their understanding of the script, the rehearsal process and their enthusiastic support of the project.