

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Need to Know, The New Dis-Ease

Sylvie · Wednesday, November 18th, 2015

Yes, of course. The title is meant to intrigue, but the problem with the world premiere of Jonathan Caren's queasy little up-to-date thriller, *Need to Know*, at Rogue Machine, is that it keeps us reaching for that elusive answer without quite giving us enough of one.

The build-up is there. Lily (Corryn Cummins) and Steven (Lucas Near-Verbrugghe), a young couple living together and planning to marry, move into a new apartment. He's an artist, who won't allow that he's down on his luck; she's a published novelist with an unacknowledged case of writer's block. And when the neighbor next door befriends them, why is the relationship so... odd and difficult?

Well, Mark, the neighbor (a terrific Tim Cummings) *is* kind of an oddball, but... also kind of a nice guy. Sometimes. He makes it his job to know all about his new neighbors almost instantly. He too has just written a book — for young adults — and it has just been published. Lily and Steven mock him privately in conversation until they realize that the walls in this building are thin and Mark can probably hear every little thing, including the sounds of foreplay. How will they handle this? Just when you think Mark's really weird, he does something really kind, soon followed by something really strange. And so it goes.

Things build in many directions. There are elements of professional rivalry, loneliness vs. the "happy couple" next door, all injected to perplex us. But above all, *Need to Know*, as the title implies, is a play about the newly expanded level of communication — social media with all its tentacles — that has devoured our lives and privacy. How happy is this couple as each partner grapples with issues? How successful is the man next door who is living such a monastic life, despite furtive mentions of dates? And did he really kill the goldfish in Lily and Steven's bowl? Suspicion lurks everywhere. If the walls don't bring it on, the Internet will.



i-r, Lucas Near-Verbrugghe, Corryn Cummins and Tim Cummings in *Need to Know*.

To Caren's absolute credit, he knows how to unbalance us. His earlier play, *The Recommendation*, displayed similar thriller elements in a terrific production at the San Diego Old Globe some time back. But that one also made you think harder about social relationships and established norms. Unlike *The Recommendation*, *Need to Know* is both more sinister and less satisfying, mostly because it never quite formulates its questions. They hang in the ether. Ironically, an ending culminating with slightly less explicit events might have helped matters by sustaining a bit more mystery.

The production in the Rogue's tiny second space contributes to the sense of disequilibrium, not only suggesting that all walls are thin — including, and perhaps especially, the ones in our heads — but the digital ones where there are no secrets. It's symptomatic that Lily can hold things back from Steven that she reveals to the new neighbor — and that Steven, in a particularly low moment, does exactly the same with the same neighbor. As threatening as this may seem, it miraculously brings them all closer together. Well, the couple at least.

Bart DeLorenzo has staged a strong production, but the in-your-face intimacy of the space underscores certain flaws— one of them being an absence of chemistry between Near-Verbrugghe's Steven and Cummins' Lily, even though we realize early there are hidden cracks in that coupling. That is a casting more than a staging issue, but it's a fundamental one and gets in the way. It also would help if Cummins could drop the vocal register some. The upper-range chirpiness tends to make her seem more trivial than she is.



Lucas Near-Verbrugghe and Corryn Cummins in *Need to Know*.

But the person to watch here is the endlessly skillful Cummings as Mark, as he switches with lightning dexterity between weirdness, friendship and, in some obvious set-ups, utterly menacing behavior.

Obvious is the operative word. *Need to Know* is on the right track and hits hard on the matter of what technology has done to change our world in some good and too many questionable if still unsettled ways.

What the play needs is one more round of refinements, hopefully with a somewhat less explicit *aha* moment between Mark and Steven that could be more effective if it were less literal and could serve to prolong the quandaries of *Need to Know*.

Top image: From left, Corryn Cummins, Tim Cummings and Lucas Near-Verbrugghe in Need to Know, at Rogue Machine.

All photos by John Perrin Flynn.

WHAT: *Need to Know*

WHERE: Rogue Theatre, 5041 Pico Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90019.

WHEN: Saturdays, 5pm; Sundays, 7pm; Mondays, 8pm. Ends Dec. 13.

HOW: Tickets, \$30-\$35, available at www.roguemachinetheatre.com or 855.585.5185.

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