

Theater

Three Serious Ladies, Finally In the Same Room: Julia Jarcho's *Nomads*  
by Ben Gassman

The circumference of the earth is 24,901 miles. This seems like a lot if you're driving through a mile or two of dense city at rush hour, or walking a mile or two from village to potable water and then back with a basket full of it. And seems like not so much if you are a junior executive at a boutique bank flying first class on a Gulf state airline to make a deal in Jo'Burg on Tuesday and then on to Osaka on Thursday. But the circumference of the SELF, that's a universally unconquerable distance. Neither vagabond spirit and lucky thumb nor great talent for finance packaging and derivative smiling can help you cross it.

Acknowledgement of this intractable dilemma, the unshakeable desire to know the whole self, to run after it clothed in the glaring knowledge that it can't be caught, is what drives Julia Jarcho's new play, *Nomads*, set to open at the Incubator Arts Center on May 30th. The dense foliage of the self, discomfort with looking in, a need to go out, to touch and be touched by others, is what sends her characters downstairs to the neighbor's and down south to the tropics. And it is what drives them to attempt talk as a means of connection, to see traces of their own reflections in strangers, and to have a bit of a hard time separating the feelings and experiences of the ones they love from their own.

Unlike last year's Obie award winning *Grimly Handsome*, which she wrote and directed, and unlike most other Jarcho plays of recent vintage, *Nomads* is not a unilaterally Jarcho endeavor. This play grows out of her long friendship with the director Alice Reagan. Alice and Julia became friends in the late '90s when they were both teenage interns at the Williamstown Theater Festival and since then, have been pen pals, collaborators, and it also turns out, great admirers of Jane Bowles.

*Nomads* does not begin like this, but it is my conjectured origin story:

*At right, ALICE, a lady, is seated between shelves in an archive at UT Austin.*

*She is reading a letter.*

*Three words incorrigibly covered by a soup stain.*

*She emits disappointment.*

*Her phone buzzes.*

*At left, JULIA, a lady, is watching a commercial for bleach.*

*She cries.*

*It is not ironic.*

*JULIA remembers something, someone.*

*She sends a text message.*

*At center, JANE, another lady, is in Tangier.*

*Her soup arrives in three languages.*

*She pens a letter as she slurps it up.*

*The archive becomes the living room becomes Tangier.*

*A typewriter arrives and also some other weaponry.*

“I’ve been a big fan of Jane Bowles for about 13 years, ever since Tory Vazquez gave me a copy of *My Sister’s Hand in Mine*, her collected works,” explains Julia. “My favorite thing in that book is the novel *Two Serious Ladies*, but there are amazing passages all through everything in it. At one point we [Alice Reagan and I] thought we would do an adaptation of the novel, but I don’t really know how to do that, it turns out. When I’ve done adaptations before, it’s because there’s something that feels really wrong and problematic about the source text, even if I also love it. But J.B.’s work, for me, is basically perfect the way it is. So I kept trying to find different ways to make room for myself, and ultimately the only way to do that was to write a totally different play and just try to let Jane work on me while I was doing it.”

What we get is something hard to describe, something that to hear both Alice and Julia talk about, could only have emerged in the triangulated and perhaps overlapping space between Jane Bowles, Alice’s trip to the Bowles archive in Austin

in 2012, and Tory Vazquez's gifting of the book to Julia years earlier.

Jean and Joan, the ladies who move through *Nomads* and an escalatingly threatening 1930s landscape, are descendants or shadow comrade adventuresses of the two sisters in *Two Serious Ladies*, maybe of Bowles herself. "We are using Bowles's life as fodder for the play," explains Regan. Things happen, dangers are felt, there are tensions between natives and immigrants, unseen tropical populations and tourists. Intimacy is almost arrived at, yet constantly there is this strong sense of disorientation undercut with traces of familiarity, recognition.

"I don't quite know how to describe Julia's plays," confesses the actress Jenny Seastone Stern, who has been inhabiting Julia Jarcho's dramatic worlds for the past decade, "especially because I know them mostly from the inside and not as an audience member, but I know that I am in love with them."

I can attest to similar feelings and experiences as an audience member watching Jenny, ostensibly from the outside, inhabit the worlds of *American Treasure* (2009), *Dreamless Land* (2011), and *Grimly Handsome* (2013). I love these things but I don't know how to describe them. And the borders between INSIDE and OUTSIDE always get a bit muddled. Particularly so in *Nomads*, in which trips are taken, but also aren't, existential mirrors are looked through, and a house becomes a jungle.

From *Nomads*, as the character Joan sorts through letters in her drawing room, with the taxi driver she flagged down after a party (and with whom she has been passing the small hours drinking) looking on:

#### JOAN

They're casting themselves off bridges, they're jogging into the surf with their pockets full, they're...*sticking around*. They write to me all the time from all over the world. They recall our adventures. There are degrees. Some insist they will always regard me as a sister. A sister! But I have no sister. It seems to *me* I have no one and have had no one, or practically.

This feels like a climactic moment in *Nomads*, but I can't tell you why. And Joan might very well be as uncertain as I am. It's more of a feeling. A wave of guilt

washing over the character of Joan, and then me. And then a wave of defiance. Me seeing myself in Joan...I think? I can't quite nail its import in a way that feels satisfying or certain enough. My confusion makes me feel inadequate.

But as it turns out, Julia wants this uncertainty from me: "Here's what I'm interested in: disabling the moment of confidence in which we go: aha, this is about *that*, I know about that. Intellectually or emotionally or whatever."

And it is really only when I start *interrogating* Julia about *Nomads* that I start to ease up on myself, to not get mad at myself for missing things. What has been happening to me in the darkly funny dramatic precincts of Jarcho is what she wants to happen to me; it's planned. "The moment that fixes something rather than unmooring something," Julia makes clear, "I'm not into it."

Speaking about the way characters in this play tend to get quickly into fairly intimate situations with strangers—particularly with regard to her delightful Driver, alternately menacing and profoundly solicitous, who ferries the distinctly more well-heeled Joan through the avenues and especially the alleys of the play—Julia reminds, "there is no need to have a common ground in order to have some kind of adventure." And in a way that is how I feel as I spend time with Jean and Joan, the two women at the play's sliding center, and the Driver as they interact across continents, living rooms, and automobile interiors with party guests, possible lovers, and Veiled Figure—who greets Jean in the jungle, a stranger emanating the faint air of some loved one or dislocated self. Like Joan—reading her letters and trying to remember this Sister (Sisters?), it is hard to know exactly where I've been and who I've been with as I move into each new scene, but I feel like I'm getting into something exciting, where I can get close to somebody interesting, and then just at that moment...I'm shaken somewhere else.

But of course Julia is interested in more than unmooring. And when I'm unmoored, being rocked this way and that, I dock happily and helplessly on the jaggedly sharp islands of dry conversational wit, archipelagoes of which abound in her plays. For what I love about Julia in conversation—and there are few people in the world as fun and thought-direction altering to talk to—is what I love most about her characters: the way empathy, mischief, and attraction to danger get densely braided into impolitely accurate, yet unprepared for responses.

Again, from *Nomads*:

JOAN

But your trip, your tropical trip! Your jungle trip. Or is it the beach? Or can there be jungle *on* the beach?

JEAN

Jungle on the beach...

JOAN

I suppose you'll find out. And what about the population. Are they friendly? We've done a lot for them, haven't we? In terms of/ structures...

JEAN

Structures, I guess. I've been practicing my Spanish.

JOAN

Estupendo!

JEAN

Hm. Culturally, you know, I have no idea who they are.

JOAN

But they'll know who you are.

There's this recognition—comic immediately, sad in aftertaste, then comic again—that awareness is but a revolving door through which ignorance circles. And here the spinning struggles of the self reverberate out exponentially, become community struggles, national struggles, global struggles, which—to stretch and suggest explicitly in a way that Julia herself is too structurally elegant to do—is maybe what happened politically and socially in the 1930s in the aftermath of the first serious

efforts to really systematize, make scientific, the unlocking of the self. If an individual can't really know herself, if two individual people can't really know each other completely, even if they are the same person, then how can peoples—of different nations or clubs or societies or creeds?

Well, if we can't know the self or each other, can we at least know what it is to be part of a place?

Back to *Nomads*:

DRIVER

Yeah you're hardly ever anywhere...

JOAN

Somewhere...

DRIVER

Nah, it's different.

There's places and then there's empty space around them. The wastes.

“The wastes” could be a physical space, as the driver seems to be suggesting explicitly, or it could be a space in my brain, as I feel when trying to figure out myself and this play and Julia and to make sense of these disparate and defiantly unstatic points in relation to one another. In this exchange, there's dangerous flirtation, there's power struggle, there's pure fear. Low grade class war, romantic inconstancy, the attraction and danger of the rising isms are the same bad itch scratched habitually and kind of happily through language.

*Nomads*, in the words of this Driver moving through it, through the wastes of the streets, through houses—to some extent it seems through Joan's consciousness, probably eventually through yours—carries “pretty much an arsenal at all times,” and “could make short work of you.” And he will. The play will. But it will also make you laugh. A lot. Yes, you will be anxious, uncomfortable, and when the lights go up, very much “unmoored.” So, revel in it. Or wonder, like Jarcho has been

asking us to do the whole time, and as Elizabeth Bishop does explicitly in her poem “Questions of Travel”: “Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?”

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***Nomads*, by Julia Jarcho, directed by Alice Reagan, runs May 30 – June 15 at Incubator Arts Project (St. Mark’s Church, 131 E. 10th Street, Manhattan). For tickets and further info, visit: [www.incubatorarts.org](http://www.incubatorarts.org) or call TheaterMania at 212-352-3101.**