

Nomads

JUN 4

Posted by [nytheater now](#)

Indie Artists on New Plays #102 Loren Noveck looks at *Nomads* at Incubator Arts



Kate Benson, Rebecca Lingafelter | Yi Zhao

“I got a telephone call this morning...” Joan says to her neighbor Jean, in the first scene of *Nomads*. “Apparently, something’s happened to Joan.” After a beat, Jean replies, “You’re Joan.”

That moment of confusion, of the slippage of names and selves, points to the mystery at the heart of *Nomads*, an elliptical and philosophical wisp of a play by Julia Jarcho (developed with director Alice Reagan, and loosely inspired by the work of [Jane Bowles](#)): How do we know who we are? How do we recognize when we’ve lost the thing that makes us ourselves? And, when that happens, what do we become? Perhaps someone—something—entirely different, even perhaps something vicious and dark? And how do we find our way back? The permutations can be dizzying.

While the surface of the piece is full of polish and wit—full of sparkling artistic characters, frequent parties, sophisticated attitudes toward relationships, and constant cocktails—there’s also an aura of menace underneath even the most seemingly innocuous, clever exchanges. Some of the darkness comes from the setting—the urban 1930s, with the shadow of the Great Depression and the Great War still present and with the Second World War already on the horizon. And some of it comes from the two central characters, both

middle-aged women, and both grappling with an inchoate sense of loss and purposelessness.

For Joan (Kate Benson, whose plummy tones shift just a little to reveal each ruffled certainty), the trouble begins with a failure of memory, triggered by the phone call about the other, missing Joan, about whom she remembers nothing. Her desk overflows with letters from supposedly dear old friends, ex-lovers, supposed childhood chums, but she can't really remember any of them—or even recognize the Joan they describe. (Maybe it's the other Joan, all along.)

Jean (the rueful Rebecca Lingafelter), too, is having lapses in memory; she mis-names people constantly (the hostess of a party she's meant to be attending, her husband's writing partner/lover). But she's also suffering from writer's block, and planning a literal escape from her present circumstance. Stuck in a moribund love triangle with her husband, Dudley, and her lover, Connie (or possibly a quadrangle if you include Dudley's never-seen lover, Richard), drinking too much and unable to write, Jean sets off on a solo journey to the jungle (the location of the jungle is never precisely named, but they speak Spanish there). In solitude and natural splendor, she hopes to step away from the person she's become, and perhaps rediscover her creative spirit. "The whole point of my going," she says, "is to... get away from myself."

Both are trying to put aside these false, hollow selves they've become and find a way to feel genuine emotion again, but both keep stumbling into and over encounters with other people. Joan meets a charismatic but obliquely threatening cab driver, and invites him for dinner. He in turn sweeps Connie into Joan's orbit, and Joan takes her in almost like a feral pet (one who might in fact turn on her). Jean, at the docks when she arrives and then in her hotel, meets a mysterious veiled figure—a sort of a spirit of the place, though possibly a figment of Jean's imagination—who becomes something between travel guide and personal assistant and introduces her to some of the mysteries of the jungle.

The visual style of the piece captures its balance of whimsy and menace: the elegant but slightly overripe costumes (Ásta Bennie Hostetter) and the set, split down the middle by a color line between orange and yellow (Carolyn Mraz) and then erupting into jungle in delightful ways; the sound design (Erik T. Lawson) and music (Chad Raines) just a shade more heightened than what you expect.

Director Alice Reagan has an effective touch with the play's complexity of tone, and it shows in the work of the actors, all of whom bring a kind of elegance to bear on even the play's flightiest flights of language, and find genuine emotional moments in the surreal and often comical situations of the characters: Jenny Seastone Stern (as Connie and the mysterious veiled figure abroad), Rebecca Lingafelter (Jean), Kate Benson (Joan), and Ben Williams (Dudley and the driver).

All the characters remain somewhat unknowable, somewhat unknown even to themselves. Names are slippery and don't quite remain attached to people; words, too, can elude the grasp (the driver keeps using "moodle" for "murder," in a very unsettling way. But by the end, all the women have tapped in to something perhaps more truthful, realer, than the social world around them—but also fraught, perhaps genuinely dangerous. It's no coincidence that the last time we see Connie, her face is smeared with blood, and that Jean ends the play in the jungle, covered in dirt. I'm not sure exactly what's happened to any of them, but it seems to be both transcendent and terrifying.