

The Realistic Joneses

By Will Eno

Plays as funny and moving, as wonderful and weird as *The Realistic Joneses* by Will Eno, do not appear often on Broadway. Or ever, really. You're as likely to see a tumbleweed lolloping across 42nd Street as you are to see something as daring as Mr. Eno's meditation on the confounding business of being alive (or not) sprouting where only repurposed movies, plays by dead people and blaring musicals tend to thrive.

And I hope the word "weird" doesn't scare you off: Mr. Eno's voice may be the most singular of his generation, but it's humane, literate and slyly hilarious. He makes the most mundane language caper and dance, revealing how absurd attempts at communication can be. He also burrows into the heart of his characters to reveal the core of their humanity: the fear and loneliness and unspoken love that mostly remains hidden beneath the surface as we plug away at life, come what may.

The play opens on a bucolic tableau that finds Bob and Jennifer Jones idling through an evening at the picnic table in their backyard, exchanging nothing-much conversation that carries an undercurrent of unease.

"It just seems like we don't talk," Jennifer says, after Bob has dodged her attempts to turn the conversation into serious channels.

"What are we doing right now, math?" Bob replies, with an edge in his deadpan.

"No, we're — I don't know — sort of throwing words at each other," his wife says.

A rustling in the garbage cans signals the arrival of the new neighbors, John and Pony, who bring a festive-looking bottle that, tellingly, remains unopened. They share the same last name and have come to this corner of the world because, as the bubbly Pony explains: "I always wanted to live in one of these little towns near the mountains. So one night, he comes home and literally just says, literally — I forget what you said exactly."

"Just, something about moving to one of these little towns near the mountains," John helpfully replies.

When Bob goes in search of glasses, Jennifer impulsively reveals the reason for their own move to the town: Bob has a degenerative disease, and a leading doctor in the field happens to live here. The treatments are experimental, and the prognosis isn't rosy.

Suddenly embarrassed at divulging so much to strangers, Jennifer says sheepishly, "I'm sorry, I just kind of blurted that all out."

John says: "That's all right. That's what separates us from the animal. You never hear animals blurting things out. Unless they're being run over by a car or something."

The disjointed push and pull of Mr. Eno's dialogue is not easy to master: He emphasizes the way in which we so often do throw words at one another, although most of us don't have the

arsenal of curveballs that, say, John does. You may come out of this play hearing a new strangeness — and perhaps a lunatic beauty — in the way a casual conversation can unfold, or at least wishing that your interactions held the entrancing oddity of Mr. Eno's characters'.

The evolving relationship between the two couples forms the plot, such as it is, of *The Realistic Joneses*. There's actually quite a bit of "drama": There's that ominous specter of death waiting in the wings, of course, but also the potential of both marriages fracturing as the characters reveal, obliquely, their frustrations and disappointments, with themselves and one another.

But don't come to the play expecting tidy resolutions, clearly drawn narrative arcs or familiarly typed characters. *The Realistic Joneses* progresses in a series of short scenes that have the shape and rhythms of sketches on "Saturday Night Live" rather than those of a traditional play. And while the Joneses — all four of them — have all the aspects of normal folks, as their names would suggest, they also possess an uncanny otherness expressed through their stylized, disordered way of communicating.

Mr. Eno's words cut to the heart of how we muddle through the worst life can bring. As Jennifer says to John, recalling a seriously strange encounter they had in the grocery store: "You were funny and weird, and you made me feel better. And I remembered people can do that. That talking with someone can make you feel better."

So can eavesdropping on people talking, which is what you might call the theater. For all the sadness woven into its fabric, *The Realistic Joneses* brought me a pleasurable rush virtually unmatched by anything I've seen this season.

- Excerpted from "Plugging Away at Living, Come What May", New York Times review of *The Realistic Joneses* by Charles Isherwood, 6 April 2014