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The fragility of reality

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The fragility of reality: the drama of Will Eno

Julian Meyrick

In the second week of rehearsals I was going to the toilet so often I knew the exact number of steps it would take to get me there. It was depressing and humiliating and frightening: a return of symptoms I had had before, but more virulent and painful. I didn't talk about them. I can talk about anything. Not this. Age nine, at boarding school, I would lock myself in the bathroom at night and cry for my vanished mother, gone as sure as the sun from the sky. Now I cloistered in that familiar environment again, staring at my wan, middle-aged face in the mirror, wondering how sick I was, knowing I was sick, really, really sick. Laughable … for now. Because, of course, one day it won't be. One day — sooner, later, whenever — I'll be on the money, and the sense of my body refusing its duties and falling apart like an old shoe will reflect what is actually going on. So it was a rehearsal in two senses, a getting ready, a gearing up. In the toilet, phone in hand, I went over all the things I had to do: The List. It was exhausting to think about. Wrapping up, giving in, giving away, repairing, resolving, reflecting. And then. Whatever comes next.

For the artists involved, the staging of a theatre play requires what surgeons and philosophers call a suture. A stitching on, in a physical sense, of what it is saying, the world it is conjuring up. Without this personal connection, drama is a just jumble of

vocalised third-person sentiments and self-conscious arm waving. Add the human element, via the suture, and the activity is transformed. Plays have a viral status. Neither dead nor alive, it is only when they come into contact with a living host that they achieve real-world solidity. We write books. We paint pictures. We compose music. We 'do' plays. And they do us, latching on to whatever passes for our souls like the Xenomorph from *Alien*, draining them into the desiccated veins of the drama, now walking around bright as a button. So it was, blood coming out of my arse, shitting eight times a day, soiled pants, angry, sad, bottled up, I went back into rehearsals to do a play — of course — about dying.

When I first met Will Eno in 2009 he was charming, intelligent and obviously the most gifted playwright I had then worked with, and I'd worked with a few. He had a sonorous, Bostonian lilt to his speech, a mix of Irish Gaelic blarney and 1788-American-War-of-Independence-Brown-Bess steel. It was an alluring, deadly combination. Here was someone as smart as I was, but far, far more talented. I was directing one of his short plays, *Lady Grey*, a monodrama 25 minutes long, the sort of piece I handled with insouciant ease: complicated subtext; subtle dialogue; minimal external action; an intellectual puzzle and an emotional IED. By the time Will arrived in Sydney I was running it off-book, and happy to open my rehearsals to him in what I took to be a judicious blend of social warmth and art form professionalism. Over the course of three days he took my work apart like an oakum picker, pulling out moments and subjecting them to quizzical dissection more devastating than any writer's tantrum. I scrambled to keep up with his notes, but the more I altered, the more dissatisfied he became. I felt the ground beneath my feet give way, as my unhappy actor beamed into my head thoughts so palpable they could have been written

in luminous paint. *WHY is he here? WHY have you not protected me? Is he telling THE TRUTH? If he is, WHY didn't YOU tell THE TRUTH? Or are you both CRAZY LIARS*? Questions to which I did not have answers, needless to say.

The second time I met Will, in 2011, it was to sleep on his couch in his Brooklyn apartment and get to know him better. His flat was small, the bathroom smaller. It was full of bottles: potions, lotions, soaps, creams, emulsions and detergents. Through the glass door of the cramped shower cubicle I cast an admiring eye over this panorama of personal care. Will was well turned out, even when off to work as a house painter. Through a chilly New York autumn we saw a succession of theatre shows. He was a great admirer of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. This is the most staged play in North America. Every day of the year a new production of it opens somewhere in the country. When it premiered on Broadway in 1938, it represented a revolution in meta-theatrical dramaturgy. No set, no props, contemporary costumes, plain white light. Like modernist architecture, modernist drama is largely defined by what isn't there. This use of negative space allows it to subvert traditional genre categories — to be real but not realistic, a conundrum I will get to later.

Our Town is set in a New Hampshire village called Grover's Corner, in 1901, as simple a place to live and work as may be imagined. Over the course of three acts the play converts into a disturbing meditation on life and death. Emily Gibbs, a young girl at the start of the story, marries during the course of it, then dies in childbirth towards the end. The final scene is set in a graveyard, where Emily sits with others who are recently deceased, waiting to melt into eternity. But before she discorporates, she chooses to relive one memory: her twelfth birthday. She goes back in time, and sees herself as she was that day, with

family and friends, and is overcome by the pain and the beauty, and the pain of the beauty, of the moment. She cannot stand it, and returns to the graveyard marvelling that the preciousness of life is unglimpsed by those actually living it.

Will and I saw a modern dress production of *Our Town* at The Bowery, as vinegary and severe as any Shaker chair, just as Wilder would have wanted it. At the end of the draughty venue there hung a black curtain. When Emily returns to her parents' house to relive her birthday, it drew back to reveal an exquisitely reconstructed turn-of-the-century kitchen, perfect in every detail. A few minutes later, the action of the brief scene was over, the curtain fell once more, and the kitchen vanished into nothingness. And Emily's memories along with it.

It was a lesson. Plays can be written for a single moment. Their purpose can be to deliver ONE thought, ONE image. And the director charged with managing such a task had better bloody get it right.

The Realistic Joneses

Six years later I prepared to stage my third Eno play. Will's dramas sit uneasily on Broadway. Too brilliant to disparage, too unsettling to love, they exist in their own adjunct space, like a clever friend you are glad not to see too often. Originally commissioned by the Yale Repertory Theatre in 2013, *The Realistic Joneses* nevertheless ran for four months in New York's Lyceum Theatre — one of Broadway's 'smaller' venues, at just 922 seats — and attracted a cluster of award nominations. Toni Collette and Tracy Letts were in the cast, and the Australian rights were held up, possibly while some mainstream company tried to entice Collette to reprise her role for Australian audiences. She must have been busy with other things, because the play eventually came to Red Stitch, a South Melbourne

theatre with a tiny studio venue of 80 seats; and via that company, to me, the director.

I gathered about me a cast of four actors — the full array of flawed humanity, plus me, the Dying One. On the page, the play was beautiful, each line a silvered bell, as if a cabal of philosophers and poets had buried their differences and come up with the perfect, blended vehicle — moving, funny and cerebral all at the same time. Off the page, it was a different matter. When we read *The Realistic Joneses* for the first time — 'for sense, not speed' — we turned a 90-minute drama into a two-and-a-quarter hour one. I still have the recording, and our appalled conversation afterwards, when we agreed, gamely, that we would get 'comfortable with our discomfort' and NOT PANIC, but work steadily to find the meaning of the drama, and thus a mode whereby it could achieve the experience it needed to be. And we were as good as our word. Though we had little idea, starting out, how flint-hard the challenge would prove.

Between the best and worst of plays there is a chasm wider than between any other two things in God's universe. *The Realistic Joneses* belongs at the upper end of the spectrum. To be in the company of such a play is both profoundly reassuring and deeply depressing. Its ingenuity is astounding, each engagement with the dialogue revealing. But we spent most of our time failing it. We spent the entire first week failing it. At the end of the second week, we put the play on its feet and ran it, scripts in hand. It took us two and a half hours. WE HAD ADDED A WHOLE HOUR TO THE PLAY. As with *Lady Grey*, I had the sensation of results getting worse as effort increased, like a trailer wheel stuck in mud. My mind ran over itself, looking for an out. But in my crepuscular subconscious, I knew well enough what was happening: I was being exposed as Simply Not Good Enough.

The Realistic Joneses comprises twelve scenes of unequal length in linear succession. The story is simple, the message not so. There are two married couples: Bob and Jennifer, and Pony and John. In the sparse notes at the start of the play they are described as 'in their 40s' and 'in their late 30s-40s' respectively. Too young to be old, too old to be young; in the middle, life starting to settle or sour. In Scene 1, Pony and John barge in on Bob and Jennifer who are sitting out in their back garden on a perfect late summer's night. The two couples live in the modern equivalent of Grover's Corner, where nothing ever happens, until it does. Pony and John have just moved into the neighbourhood and wouldn't you know it? The couples have the same surname: Jones.

A four-character drama presents 15 possible relationships, which can be expressed in a matrix thus:

Bob	Jennifer-John	Bob-Jennifer-Pony
Jennifer	Pony-John	Bob-Jennifer-John
Pony	Bob-Pony	Bob-Pony-John
John	Bob-John	Jennifer-Pony-John
Bob-Jennifer	Jennifer-Pony	Bob-Jennifer-Pony-John

Each of these is a different refraction of the audience's intelligence and a different information state. But time also plays an important part. Scene 1, Scene 10 and Scene 12 are ones where all four characters appear together, but the quality and impact of their interactions is very different. An entire maturity is packed into a drama's unfolding, so that when we get to the end of the play we watch it as people who believe we know the characters well, experts who can spot the subtleties and suggestions that at the start had to be flagged with a car horn.

The Realistic Joneses is 81-pages long. Scene 1 and Scene 12 take up 26 pages, or roughly a third of the play's duration. Every variation in the relationship matrix is seen in the intervening ten scenes, save one: at no point are Pony and Jennifer alone on stage together (the shaded box). This can be stated in a more active way: at no point is it *possible* for Pony and Jennifer to be alone together because from a dramatic perspective they display entirely different qualities of being; Jennifer, organised, disciplined, capable; Pony, desirable, distractable, useless. It is less that they dislike each other and more that there is no zone of human contact they can meaningfully co-invest. By the end of the play this has changed. A friendship between the two women — incongruous and unlooked for — has arisen. This is comforting, since by then we know for a stone cold fact that Bob and John will shortly die.

In the long scene that opens the play — nearly 20 minutes — it becomes clear that Bob is struggling in some way. Has he got a brain injury? Is he mentally impaired? Or is he simply a grumpy middle-aged man? It is hard to tell.

> Jennifer: Okay. But, so, anyway, I do bookkeeping for a couple of businesses in town. And Bob works for the Department of Transportation. He does all the ordering, like for paint and signposts. Don't you, Bob?
>
> Bob: *(brief pause)* What do you want me to say?
>
> Jennifer: How about, 'yes'.
>
> Bob: Yes.
>
> Pony: It's funny, all that paint on the road — I never thought about who orders it. Do they ever use something other than yellow for the lines in the middle?
>
> Bob: No, but actually, do you know why those lines are always yellow?

Pony: No, why?

Bob: I think somebody just picked it a long time ago.

Pony: Oh.

John: It's exciting to get the inside story.

In Scene 2, John runs into Jennifer in the local supermarket, and Bob's medical history comes out. He has Harriman Leavey Syndrome (HLS), a terminal nerve disease that affects his cognitive processing and control of language. You won't find HLS in The *Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy*, but there are a number of similar illnesses in there, just as Bob and Jennifer and John and Pony do not exist on a plane of actuality, but might as well, because there are so many people like them who do. What is being proposed is something *real* but not necessarily *realistic*. The terms 'real' and 'realistic' usually go together. But sometimes they don't. Sometimes what happens to us goes beyond what can be shown in a socially representative way. Degenerative nerve diseases do occur in real life. But what they are *like to have* is another matter, and isn't easy to articulate, unless we have one ourselves, or know someone who does. But even then.

To Jennifer's surprise, John makes no attempt to empathise with her or her husband's condition. He's a smart-arse, one of the great comic creations of contemporary post-dramatic theatre. His talk resembles a drunk stumbling through a late night party full of loosely connected conversations. Nothing he says is straightforward, or even makes sense. As Jennifer pours out her heart in the supermarket isle, John is only disjointedly responsive. Instead he is very, very funny:

Jennifer: We're thinking about painting the house.

John: Well, make sure you pick a color you like. Anyway, go on — you were talking about Bob's thing, the Benny Goodman Experience.

> Jennifer: It's the Harriman Leavey Syndrome. It's an irreversible and degenerative nerve disease. Do you have a hilarious punchline for that?
>
> John: No. Actually, wait. *(He may have thought of a punchline.)* No, that wouldn't work. *(Very brief pause.)* I'm sorry, go ahead. I'll listen.
>
> Jennifer: I don't talk to anybody about this. *(Very brief pause.)* So, yeah, now he's doing this treatment, which is, just, the AMA doesn't recognise it because there isn't a whole protocol, yet. It's hard, because he never … I mean, Bob doesn't want to know anything about any of it. He keeps saying, 'Just tell me where to be and what to take.'
>
> John: I could understand that.
>
> Jennifer: I don't know if you could.
>
> John: Probably not. Did you hear me listening, just then?
>
> Jennifer: Oh, is that what that was.
>
> John: The secret is not saying anything.

John's humour is compulsive and propulsive. He is always wise-cracking, and his jokes abrade the quotidian like a drag car burning rubber, readying to high-tail it out of there. What is going on inside him does not correlate with the life he is obliged to lead. Asked to give his profession, he doesn't hesitate: ASTRONAUT. Asked what he does for work he replies evenly: heating and air conditioning. In the gap between the two answers, a gap with which most of us are familiar, caught between who we believe we are and who we have to be, John pegs his tent. Reality is not always real. The thrum of our blood and the spill of our imagination, in art and dreams, are reminders there is another person inside us. The *real* us.

Rehearsals at Red Stitch took place over Easter, a time of renewal in the northern hemisphere, a slow sloughing into winter in the southern one. The Melbourne sky was slate grey,

unchanging in appearance, cooling in temperature. In felt-tip pen I wrote the scene numbers on index cards and stuck them onto the back wall of the rehearsal space. I gave each one a name — 'John and Jennifer in the supermarket'; 'Pony Prayer Scene'; 'the Breakdown' — and underneath I wrote the key lines that occurred in the dialogue. In a 90-minute play with a standard narrative arc, an inciting incident should occur somewhere between the 10th and 30th minute. This incident must be of sufficient amplitude to change not only the direction of the action, but the audience's understanding of it. I call it 'the first turn', and its job is to deepen our collective engagement, to turn words into a world. The incident does not have to be large, since it presages a change in inner communication between stage and audience. Yet even by parsimonious modern theatre standards, *The Realistic Joneses* does not offer much of a pin-hinge to herald an adjustment in what it is trying to say. Scene 3 is in Pony and John's kitchen, and contains no major events. Scene 5 is similar in setting and dramatic quiescence. Scene 4, between Jennifer and Bob, occurs on the morning of a medical check-up, and shows Bob being an arsehole, perhaps because his mental capabilities are more degraded than we at first guessed, perhaps because that's just what he's like. By the time Pony appears in Scene 6 to ask Jennifer and Bob's help with John, who has collapsed on the lawn next door, the 40-minute mark has well and truly ticked by. There seemed to be a hole in the narrative you could fly a plane through. What had Bob or Jennifer or John or Pony actually *done* with their lives, as portrayed by Will Eno, when they were so obviously and achingly *ordinary*? As we explored the play further, our concern became, 'Did enough HAPPEN to invite people into it in a deeper way? Or was it just BORING?'

During week two of rehearsals, my sister called to say that our mother had had a fall. She had one at the start of the year, then recovered, but fell again the morning she returned home, on her way to the bathroom. So she was back in hospital, and the doctors were running tests, not only on her hip, which was obviously broken, but psychological ones, to determine whether she had dementia. Or the level of dementia she had. The previous month I had flown to Sydney to see her. Now she had no memory of it. My sister gave me some brochures to read. 'Primary progressive aphasia (PPA) is a form of cognitive impairment that involves a progressive loss of language function. Language is a uniquely human faculty that allows us to communicate with each other through the use of words. Our language functions include speaking, understanding what others are saying, repeating things we have heard, naming common objects, reading and writing … PPA is caused by degeneration in the parts of the brain that are responsible for speech and language.'[1]

Bob and Jennifer move to their small, nothing-happens town because Dr. Leavey, the discoverer of Harriman Leavey Syndrome, lives there, and offers an experimental treatment for the disease. In Scene 6, set in Jennifer and Bob's backyard, and Scene 7, set in John and Pony's kitchen, two things become evident. First, John also has HLS. Second, Bob and Pony are attracted to each other. In Scene 8, Bob comes round to John and Pony's house at night. John surprises him under the security lights and gives him some typical John-schtick; to which Bob, whose mental impairment has rendered the perfect straight man, is totally oblivious. In Scene 9 he finds her alone in her house, praying, while John is off on a long walk. They talk and just as Bob is about to leave, Pony asks:

> Pony: Maybe you can help me with something.

John: What? I mean, sure.

Pony: I don't know what you'd call it. *(She presses her hand flat onto his chest).* Self-improvement? But don't get the wrong idea.

Bob: What's the wrong idea?

Pony: What do you care what the wrong idea is?

Bob: I don't. I just didn't want to be having it.

Lights fade. They exit together.

In Scene 10, John is again off walking but comes back and has a breakdown, a sort of mental glitch, in front of the others as they prepare to go off to a school fete.

Jennifer: Are you all right?

John: (To Jennifer) I'm fine, darling. Sorry, thought you were someone else. I've been drinking.

Jennifer: You've been drinking?

John: That's what I said, yeah.

Bob: It's ten in the morning.

John: Yeah? What temperature is it? How's the traffic?

Pony: John, don't. Come on.

John: Come on, and what?

Pony: Just come on and go to the fair.

John: I'm sorry, everybody, I don't normally ruin nice weather like this. Especially not at 'ten in the morning' — much obliged, Bob. By the way, I wonder, when you and Pony were comparing fears and exchanging fluids, did you happen to use protection? I'm really just asking to ask. A husband gets curious. Although, not that curious, surprisingly. Distance is funny.

Going into week three we had a lucky break. We held an open rehearsal for Red Stitch donors, a usually clunky affair in

which the intimacy of real preparation is exchanged for a theatricalised version as awkward as a vicar's tea party. We chose to do the ever-failed Scene 1. But … our audience laughed. Laughed and laughed, and suddenly the dialogue dropped into place: the thrust of the comedy, the bounce of the lines, the turns-on-a-dime that had to be accomplished with the gravity and skill of an old-style Soviet gymnast. By the end of the week, we had the first half of the play firing and a passable version of the low-key, wake-like last scenes. By week four we had the whole thing down to an hour fifty. Yet try as we might we could not get the two halves to meet. The play still had a hole in the middle, which meant it remained null and void, a portrait photograph with the face cut out. One time, the beginning would work, next time, the end. Individual scenes would light up like the valves of an antique radio, only to stay dark when repeated later, not to be 'do-able' after all. I would come into rehearsals early and stare at the scene cards, as if the secret to the show's success lay literally with THE WRITING ON THE WALL. No dice. Some news though: I wasn't dying. Or no faster than usual. I had Adult Onset Allergies and many of the things I used to eat with gusto, I now could not eat at all. I changed my diet and the visits to the bathroom decreased proportionally. I emerged from the doctor's surgery a little shaken up but ready to run my race until such time as a real terminal illness arrived to finish me off.

Realism

What is *The Realistic Joneses* about? What is its style? Why is John's breakdown so terrifying, although on the page it seems nothing but a progression of word slips? How is the 'first turn' accomplished if there are so few events at the beginning of the drama? The answers to these questions show how the play

projects its singular nature. They also show how we connect to it, as artists and audiences, how an irreducible bond steals over us, until what happens externally does not matter anymore, because an empathy is achieved akin to a transmigration of souls.

Realism in theatre is a tricky genre to define. It is discussed in Eric Bentley's elegant *The Playwright as Thinker*,[2] in Raymond William's *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*,[3] (the best short analysis), in J.L. Styan's *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice Vol. 1: Realism and Naturalism*,[4] and in Stephen Lacy's *British Realist Theatre.*[5] The first realist play was *Thérèse Raquin*, which premiered in 1873. In his introduction, Emile Zola, the author, gives a mission statement for all realist playwrights — the great, the good and the godawful — who have followed in his wake, when he stated that

> We must cast aside fables of every sort, and delve into the living drama of the twofold life of the character and its environment, bereft of every nursery tale, historical trappings, and the usual conventional stupidities… Naturalism alone corresponds to our social needs; it alone has deep roots in the spirit of our times; and it alone can provide a living, durable formula for our art.

Zola's play about an adulterous couple who first commit murder, then suicide, looks today as far from realism as the rank melodrama it sought to supplant. But other, greater playwrights heard his call. Henrik Ibsen turned away from verse drama and historical settings to prose dialogue and contemporary problems, as did his Swedish rival, August Strindberg. *Thérèse Raquin* was chiefly of value as a rhetorical vehicle. It announced a Big Idea that would produce, in time, the drama to back it up.

What happened to realism then is what happens to all Big Ideas that change the world: they also change themselves. In the

20th and 21st centuries, realism was distorted, distended, applied selectively, applied literally, applied loosely, turned on its head, turned on its head and then turned back again. If you read even a small sample of 'realistic' plays, you discover a diversity so mind-bending as to make you wonder what they have in common save the label. But then how real is reality, anyway, of what is it COMPOSED? It was philosopher Georg Hegel who noted that everything exists in relation to the absence it will sooner or later become. Inside the young woman is the old woman; inside the old woman, the sick woman; inside the sick woman, the corpse. The process of alteration from one state to another is constant, but we only notice when a chain of small quantitative shifts presages a big qualitative change. Suddenly, we are old. Or sick. Or dead. At these moments, one condition replaces another with an interpretive violence that makes us appreciate how provisional reality really is. Like a vast night growing within us, our lives subsume a succession of transitional states that disappear one into another, and thence into nothingness. The child we no longer are; the youth we no longer are; the health we no longer have; until our dance with change is done and we no longer are, period. To this relationship between being and non-being, Hegel gave the term 'negative dialectics'.

Like Wilder's *Our Town*, Will Eno's *The Realistic Joneses* deals with the mysteriousness of reality, and its haunting by the ghost of its future transformation, what we might call 'the real', since we feel its applicable, truthful quality, yet by the time we can name it, it has already passed. Reality and 'the real' thus append different aspects of the condition of being alive. The first, we can point to, pin down, talk about. The second is eyeless and shadowy, apprehension without word. Reality is the indexical product of the sum of the things around us. The *real*, always in

the process of being born, is an emergent fog of understanding. The real we just *know*.

If rehearsals for *The Realistic Joneses* were tough, the bump-in and previews were almost unendurable. We ran it and ran it and ran it. One preview *almost* worked. On the last one Max Gillies turned up and said, 'Well, that was something. But what?' It isn't easy to communicate the mysteriousness of death to an audience resolutely alive. Or so we feared, when we were down and nearly out. But the great thing about 'doing' a great play is that you know there is a way through, if you could but find it. In fact, there were two moments we had yet to nail.

The first was the last moment in the play, and I made it up. Or, to put it in a way that might help Will forgive me, I extrapolated it from the drama and visually distilled it into a *kairos* or transcendent image. UNFORTUNATELY, I only had a budget of $100 for this STARTLING EFFECT, and the best my designers could come up with were 300 non-dimmable fairy lights in a three-sided *periaktos* lined with tin foil. There was also a smoke machine with an excitable pump that gave the impression the backstage was on fire.

As we struggled through the previews, my would-be vision of sublimity was a garish reminder of how far from it we were falling short. On a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 being 'most sublime', we rated a minus 4. But we kept working. What else could we do? I was giving notes, and the actors were responding to them 30 minutes before Opening Night. Actually, by then I think we were BEYOND CARING, that the play had become an infinitely mysterious puzzle, akin to Celtic runes, whose meaning would always lie beyond our understanding.

The second moment is in Scene 5. You'd miss it, if you weren't alert to the subtle shifts in register whereby ordinary people deal with the extraordinary things that happen to them,

and if you didn't know Secret Bathroom Business, which of course I did. It stretches out the 'first turn' to the maximum possible — around 35 minutes. But it's there all right:

> Pony: (Brief pause.) It seems like you're rustling around, every night.
>
> John: Am I waking you up?
>
> Pony: No, but can you do your breathing somewhere else?
>
> John: What?
>
> Pony: Whatever you're doing in the bathroom. It's like panting or something.
>
> John: Oh. Sorry. Yeah — it's this deep-breathing thing. I didn't think you heard that.
>
> Pony: I do. It sounds like you're crying.
>
> John: Come on —- do I look like someone who leans on the sink and cries all night? (Brief pause.) No, it's for relaxation.
>
> Pony: What do you need to relax about? Me?
>
> John: No, come on. Just, moving, work, just life.
>
> Pony: You don't care about that stuff.
>
> John: I know.
>
> Pony: I can do it with you, if you want. The exercises.

He doesn't want, and she doesn't offer again. Perhaps he knows she doesn't really mean it. Perhaps she knows that he couldn't cope if she did.

When even one bulb in a bank of fairy lights isn't passing on the current, they stay off. They're dead. When the current transmits, they come on. They're alive. That's what happened on Opening Night. The last moments of the drama slid into place. The circuit was joined. The play was 'done', and Red Stitch lit up with a sense of the *real* that no scientific lecture, no philo-

sophical discourse, no media commentary, could come close to realising in its magnificent strangeness, and black, god-like power.

The Realistic Joneses is about many things — the limits and grandeur of everyday existence; the impossibility and dignity of marriage; the miraculous fireworks that is ordinary language — but mostly it is about this: that like Bob and John we are going to die, and the fact of this matter is not *the end* of who we are, it *is* who we are: the meaning of life's journey in its deepest sense.

Me, (for) now

I listen to the thrum of my aging body, and the descant creaking that is its newly acquired music. Tests, doctors, more tests. All good. For now. And this I have come to realise is as a good as it gets, as it can ever get. At the end of the play, John says this: 'I always think I'm hearing something. But it's like something in my blood. Something flowing through me. And I wonder, "what?". Which is scary … And I [think], maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm flowing through me. And I should just kind of go with it.' Yes. That's right, John. That's *real.*

Endnotes

1 http://www.brain.northwestern.edu/pdfs/Disease%20Summaries/ppa.pdf (last accessed 12 September, 2017)
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3 Williams, Raymond. *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht.* Rev. and Enl. ed. London: Chatto & Windus, 1968.
4 Styan, J. L. M*odern Drama in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
5 Lacey, Stephen. *British Realist Theatre: The New Wave in its Context 1956–1965*. London: Routledge, 1995.