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The Vermont Plays: Four Plays



Synopsis

"Baker may just have the subtlest way with exposition of anyone writing for the theater today... There is something distinctly Chekhovian in the way her writing accrues weight and meaning simply through compassionate, truthful observation." --Charles Isherwood, New York Times "Baker has a soft spot for the abandoned, the discarded, the hard luck case... her heartbreaking works of staggering focus have actually rescued realism from the aesthetic scrap heap" -- Helen Shaw, Time Out New York "Baker is a writer whose plays have a quiet, hypnotic charm, a grace and humor. She's able to take ordinary, low-key situations--a small-town acting class, guys wasting time in an alley behind a cafe--and fill them with gentle comedy, generosity of spirit and an eye (and ear) for the foibles that make us all so hopelessly human." --Village Voice

The debut play collection of Annie Baker includes *The Aliens*: an exploration of friendship and music in the lives of three misfits behind a coffee shop; *Circle Mirror Transformation*: a meditation on life within the rhythms of an adult drama class; *Nocturama*: A dark comedy in which a grown son returns home to live with his mother and stepfather; and *Body Awareness*: a close look at a nontraditional family dealing with an unexpected guest. Annie Baker's other plays include *The Flick* and an adaptation of *Uncle Vanya*. She won an Obie Award for Best New American Play for *The Aliens* and *Circle Mirror Transformation*. She is a 2011 United States Artists Fellow and a resident playwright at the Signature Theatre.

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Customer Reviews

NAMED BEST YOUNG PLAYWRIGHT OF 2010 BY THE VILLAGE VOICE
The Aliens
FIVE STARS:

"Baker has a soft spot for the abandoned, the discarded, the hard luck case... her heartbreaking works of staggering focus have actually rescued realism from the aesthetic scrap heap" -- Helen Shaw, *Time Out New York*"Baker may just have the subtlest way with exposition of anyone writing for the theater today... There is something distinctly Chekhovian in the way her writing accrues weight and meaning simply through compassionate, truthful observation." -- Charles Isherwood, *New York Times*

Our first glimpse in Britain of work by Annie Baker, the much-lauded young US dramatist...evinces a real talent for the kind of gentle humour that illustrates how the sadness and the silliness of life are interwoven. -- Paul Taylor, *The Independent*

FOUR STARS: What I like about this play is that it's funny, but doesn't go for easy laughs. It has the courage to be, like its central characters, quite unambitious. -- Dominic Cavendish, *The Telegraph*

Baker's play will have you laughing one moment and tearing up the next. -- Jenna Scherer, *Boston Herald*

Circle Mirror Transformation"Annie Baker's play is an absolute feast. Circle Mirror Transformation is the kind of unheralded gem that sends people into the streets babbling and bright-eyed with the desire to spread the word. The play traces the lives of a handful of small-town Vermont residents who gather each week for an acting class taught at the local community center. By the play's end we seem to see to the very bottom of these souls, and feel how the artificial intimacy of the acting class has shaped their lives in substantial ways. -- Charles Isherwood, *The New York Times*

Orchestrated with a subtlety and unfailing naturalness that make the play's small revelations disarming and unexpected. The characterizations display a miniaturist attention to detail that goes down to the bone

Baker is never blind to their weaknesses and faults, yet regards them all with a warm, empathetic eye." -- David Rooney, *Variety*"Baker develops her characters slowly through their interactions each week in class, which is the only place we see them. Naturally, their real, offstage lives gradually infiltrate the classroom, revealing insights and transformations both humorous and heartbreaking." -- Jessica Farrar, *Associated Press*

FIVE STARS: The way that a complete picture of each of the characters is built up is stunningly accurate. A little room sucks in the whole world. -- Aleks Sierz, *The Arts Desk*

FOUR STARS: A quirky, entertaining and quietly poignant piece

Scenes as apparently aimless as a group count-up to 10 or a dialogue improvised using nonsense words acquire a sudden powerful intensity as latent emotions bubble to the surface. -- Dominic Cavendish, *The Telegraph*

FOUR STARS: A Disarming surprise

The piece is remarkably open-minded in its supple, low-key way, shifting from the preposterous to the poignant, the tender to the silly, with a sharply observant but uncensorious spirit. -- Paul Taylor, *The Independent*

FOUR STARS: Baker's writing is

compassionate, cinematic (in an understated sort of way) and wonderfully, wonderfully droll. -- Andrzej Lukowski, *Time Out London*;...Baker's play, which does not have an intermission and is divided into episodes that correspond to the weeks of the class, walks a careful line between satirizing how people look to the arts to solve their problems and admiring them for having the guts to do so. It would be too easy to be mean to these people, and while *Circle Mirror Transformation* eschews sentimentality, it always seems to believe in the promise of the third word of its title." -- Chris Jones, *Chicago Tribune*

Body Awareness"An engaging new comedy by a young playwright with a probing, understated voice...Its quiet rewards steal up on you." -- Charles Isherwood, *The New York Times*"Sexuality's endless capacity to make us miserable is the keynote of Annie Baker's gentle satire, which takes just four actors and 90 minutes to spin an astonishingly complex web of emotions and ideas...Body Awareness is a smart, modest work about ordinary, flawed people, grasping for connection, but none of it feels small, thanks to Baker's sharp ear for the deeply painful and funny longings squirming under her characters' dialogue. What a beautiful start to a young playwright's theatrical body of work." -- David Cote, *Time Out New York*

In rising playwright Annie Baker's *Body Awareness*, you can surely see the seeds of compassionate humanism and warm comedy that have helped make her such a rapid success. -- Chris Jones, *Chicago Tribune*; Highly Recommended! What distinguishes *Body Awareness* is Annie Baker's wealth of empathy for her troubled, fallible characters. Throughout, Baker's touch remains both daring and marvelously subtle, suggesting layers of personal history in a few deft strokes. -- John Beer, *Time Out Chicago*

The style in Annie Baker's four plays collected here in *The Vermont Plays* is a kind of hyper-charged, intensely poetic realism. Allied to that, there is affection for the misplaced souls of our time, who still have dreams of their own, however pitiful they may seem to those of us who are better off.

The Aliens (2010) is about two exceptionally heavy losers. Jasper seethes with rage because his girlfriend, who is just as much a loser as he is, has just left him. He sees himself as a Kerouac or Bukowski manqué. He's writing a novel, although he really can't write, and he reads parts of it to his friend, KJ, as they molder their days away sitting on the back patio of a Vermont coffee house. As for KJ, for KJ the Sixties still live, though he probably wasn't even born yet: he laces his tea with shrooms, talks some of the time for no purpose, chills out the rest of the time. And then there's dweeby Evan: he actually works in the coffee house and alternates between fear that he'll lose his job if he can't get Jasper and KJ off the patio and

fascination with these two aliens who have taken root on the back porch and say and do strange things --because Evan would like to do something strange for a change but his mother won't let him. This is a strange play. It's odd in the choice of characters and how the action hangs together, and the dialogue is elliptical rather than straightforward or narrative. But at heart, *The Aliens* is a buddy play and it explores how friendship can blossom in the most desolate environment. And the dialogue is awesome. *Circle Mirror Transformation* (2009) is amazing, the best play in a collection of four very good plays. It's also one of the best plays about doing theater that I've read. Most plays about the dramatic act quickly fall flat: they seem phony, about the surface business and rivalries of the stage and not about the act of creating or what one creates for. In this play, five people --two men, three women-- meet weekly for an adult drama class. In the class, they do not plays or scenes but improv exercises. The first week, it is counting from one up to six, each person taking the successive number and determining how long to wait before saying it. Later, one person stands in front of the class and plays a classmate, presenting the other person's life story as his (or her) own. This is the only time we see these people, and we see their lives primarily in the context of these abstract theater exercises. But gradually, over the weeks, a sense of their characters and aspirations builds up: we half-see, half-intuit hidden conflicts that exist between members of the group. There is a denouement of sorts but it would be a crime to unveil it. Suffice it to say, this is a superior piece of theater, drama in the best sense of the word. In *Nocturama* (n.d.), a twenty-seven-year-old loser loses his girl and moves back into his mother's house. He has issues: he doesn't see why he should try to get back on his feet by himself, he smokes his bong too much, one time he tries to climb into bed with his mother and her boyfriend. The boyfriend has compulsions of his own --for one, a computer game called *Nocturama*, which he plays obsessively-- and he's already run through two failed marriages and is on his way to ruining this new relationship. When the son brings a young woman home for dinner, things go south quickly. In Baker's sly comedy, *Body Awareness* (2008), a lesbian couple --Joyce teaches high school, Phyllis is a psychology professor at Shirley State-- prepare for Body Awareness Week at the university. Phyllis announces each night's events, introducing the various guest artists. Joyce has a son, Jared. Phyllis thinks Jared's autistic, but Jared insists he's not, just awkward with people. The couple takes in the guest artist for the week, a man who takes photographs of nude women. Phyllis is outraged. It's a male exploitation play. Joyce is not,

she's intrigued, actually thinks of asking him to photograph her in the raw. As the week goes on, Phyllis progressively comes unglued. The language is at a more elevated level in this play than it is, say, in *The Aliens* or *Nocturama* --after all, Phyllis does teach college --and the dialogue and actions are more overtly funny (although there's a lot of humor in all these plays). All four of these plays show Baker's talent.

Every play I've read by this playwright over the past few days has rated five stars. Okay, her plots seem nearly as random as life (they're not, actually); nevertheless, they acquire peculiar, terrible suspense as they plod along, and her characters are so vividly drawn that they break your heart in their ordinariness. In a recent interview she claimed that she never thought about it consciously, but all four plays "are about how art can save your life." That was enough for me. I immediately ordered her Vermont Plays and stayed up all night reading the first two: "The Aliens", about two 30-something slackers and a teenager hanging out behind a coffeeshop (much more satisfying and less judgmental than Eric Bogosian's "Suburbia"), and "Circle Mirror Transformation", about five community theatre actors in a "creative acting class" who, without meaning to, reveal those tender, terrible secrets that make us all human. I know, both premises sound horribly unpromising, but her treatment of the characters is at once so unflinching and so compassionate that I found myself laughing out loud, tearing up, and wanting to shoot emails to all my friends about this amazing new playwright. "Nocturama" was harder to take--it's about Skaggs, a self-hating, depressed young man who moves in with his mom and stepfather to recover but ends up abusing everyone around him. Darkly funny, "Nocturama" is far less flashy and mean-spirited than "August: Osage County" because the real protagonists are not the young man but the vulnerable, flawed people who try so patiently to love him back to health. (Baker has not yet allowed this one to be performed.) The final play, "Body Awareness," is about a lesbian couple and their son Jared, who may or may not have Asperger's syndrome. This one is closest to having a Big Topic to consider (namely, the White Male Gaze), but once again Baker's humanity prevails over political agenda. All four plays unfold in the mythical town of Shirley, Vermont, but while her un-cynical, unhurried stories may remind you of life in Horton Foote's Harrison TX or Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegone, her beautiful, sometimes brittle voice is distinctly her own. I wish she'd have written twenty such plays, so I could just sit and eat them like juicy novels, but Annie Baker is only in her early thirties and seems to be turning them out as fast as she can. Her work made me love reading plays again.

Annie Baker is my go to writer for plays! It's almost like she watches people interact with each other,

writes it down in a book, and then puts it into a play. Her characters come to life so easily and all of them are memorable. From the stoner-esque friends in "The Aliens" (my favorite of these plays) to the normal, paranoid couple of "Body Awareness" to the weird, meant-to-fail relationship in "Nocturama". I loved all these plays and hope to be in them in the near future!

Annie Baker writes like a modern Chekhov. Her work is character-driven, subtle, and witty. Unfortunately, her plays feel a little small because her focus is almost exclusively on the faint but taught interpersonal conflict between her characters. While this often is the strongest feature of her work, her reliance on it leaves everything feeling a little one-note. Still definitely worth a read though.

I bought this book for my son for Christmas. He has read other books by Annie Baker (I saw them on his bookshelf), so I'm sure he will love this book. I may ask to borrow it, myself. :)

One of America's most exciting new playwrights. Characters that are simultaneously detailed living humans, and contemporary archetypes that resonate with a reality bigger than simple individuals.

Circle mirror transformation is beautiful.

Love her.

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