

theatre review

LITTLE DEATHS

In 2009, a pair of French medical researchers published the first findings ever on the physiological processes of clitoral stimulation and orgasm, based on 3-D sonogram scans of women undergoing said states. How the subjects managed to maintain those states under such non-arousing conditions is a mystery, but the result is a clear picture of a much more intricate and dynamic physical event than previously thought. Not that that would be difficult, seeing as it wasn't until 2005 that the size, shape and anatomy of the clitoris had even been mapped.

It's shocking to realize that an organ as important (and celebrated) as the clitoris could be so overlooked by the medical field, until we remember that it was not so terribly long ago that female orgasm was regarded as a myth, like the Loch Ness Monster. For a woman to have a climax would mean that she enjoyed sex, which proper ladies did not do, as evidenced by etiquette and hygiene manuals for women and girls published as late as the 1950s. Sex was something to be endured for the sake of procreation and the satisfying of those animal urges that husbands simply could not help but have. Sadly, even decades and a few waves of feminism and post-feminism (whatever that is) later, science is only now getting around to investigating what makes women tick, hum, rumble and purr.

The gap between masculine science and feminine nature is the basis for Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room, or The Vibrator Play*, which also made its first appearance in 2009. The title is a grabber to be sure, but like the female sex drive, the play is far more complex than it would appear to be on the surface, and the UGA Theatre's current production does it justice and then some.

The play opens with a young Edwardian-era mother, Catherine Givings (**Paige Pulaski**), entertaining her new baby with the wonder of an electric lamp. Their household has been blessed by the advent of electricity in more ways than one. Her husband (**Mark Fowler**) is a doctor who has developed a singular practice built around the treatment of women suffering from "hysteria," using an electric-powered wand—basically a steampunk Hitachi—to stimulate the nether regions and thus relieve "congestion of the womb."

We see Dr. Givings administer this treatment, ably assisted by his nurse Annie (**Sellers Webb**), to his new patient, Sabrina Daldry (**Natalia Hernandez**), who suffers from delusions, anxieties and a decided lack of enthusiasm for her marital duty to her pompous husband (**Jarrad Holbrook**). Mrs. Daldry responds immediately and profoundly to the doctor's invention and becomes a regular patient.

Like many doctors of the era, Givings' practice is in his home, and while he is stimulating his patient in one room, in the other, his wife is suffering. Givings is distant and

stultifyingly proper, enthused only by his science and his evenings at his club, debating the merits of alternating and direct current. Catherine, unable to lactate adequately, has had to give her child over to a wet nurse, Elizabeth (**Jasmine Thomas**), who has just lost a baby to cholera. Growing ever more lonely and desperate, Catherine finds herself drawn to Givings' other new patient, a bohemian painter named Leo Irving (**Malcolm Campbell-Taylor**) whom Givings treats with a more phallic variation on his device. Flamboyant and spontaneous and wild with enthusiasm, Leo is everything Givings is not.

Just as Givings' marvelous contraption shocks his patients into new sensations, the play is one of awakenings, each of its characters startled into new feelings and attractions he or she has never experienced before and



Natalia Hernandez (L) and Paige Pulaski (R) star in the UGA Theatre's production of *In the Next Room, or The Vibrator Play* through Sept. 30.

forced to take a hard look at what they have and what each suddenly wants. Every character, even Elizabeth the wet nurse and Annie the doctor's aide, finds himself or herself galvanized into hard choices rife with danger and the prospect of heartbreak. The play may be subtitled *The Vibrator Play* but its soul is in its main title, about the courage it takes to open the door into the next room where anything could happen.

Director **Kristin Kundert Gibbs** has done an amazing job at the helm of this production. Her cast is superb, navigating between the funny, the sexy and the deadly serious with a facility not often seen in student actors. The costumes are gorgeous and authentic down to the corsets and bustles, and the set, comprised of the Givings' drawing room, the doctor's office and a third surprise, is warm and beautiful.

Needless to say, this is a play for adults. Not only is the subject matter not for kids, but there is some brief but unmistakable nudity, very tastefully done and utterly appropriate but definitely not something you'll want to spend time explaining on the car ride home. For those 18 and up, however, *In the Next Room* will be a real pleasure and every bit as stimulating as its subject.

John G. Nettles

In the Next Room continues in the Cellar Theatre in the UGA Fine Arts Building at the corner of Lumpkin and Baldwin streets, Sept. 26–28 at 8 p.m. and Sept. 30 at 2:30 p.m. Tickets are \$16, \$12 for students, and can be purchased at www.drama.uga.edu/box-office, by phone at 706-542-4400, at the Performing Arts Center box office, or at the door before the show.