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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

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 -- "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.

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.

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