**City Lights' 'In the Next Room...' a delightful examination of female hysteria**

* [City Lights](http://www.examiner.com/topic/city-lights)
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Bottom of Form

Dr. Givings (Jeffrey Bracco) has perfected a remedy to treat hysteria in his patient Sabrina (Sarah Moser) in "In the Next Room or the Vibrator Play" at City Lights Theatre Company

Credits:

City Lights Theatre Company



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**Rating for In the Next Room or the vibrator play**

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There is an advertisement dated back to 1910. It is an ad for vibrators. But based on the date, this ad is not found in some kind of dating periodical or in the sports pages. And it’s not even targeted at any type of sexual pleasure. This advertisement is looking for crazy women. And in the ad are these words – “"The secret of the ages has been discovered in Vibration. Great scientists tell us that we owe not only our health but even our life strength to this wonderful force. Vibration promotes life and vigour, strength and beauty...Vibrate Your Body and Make It Well. YOU Have No Right to Be Sick."  
It is a fascinating phenomenon that is tackled head on at [City Lights](http://www.examiner.com/topic/city-lights/articles) Theatre Company through Sunday, June 18th. Playwright Sarah Ruhl’s modern masterpiece “[In the Next Room or the Vibrator Play](http://www.examiner.com/topic/the-next-room-or-the-vibrator-play/articles),” was one of the best shows I saw in 2009, in its premiere at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. It was directed by Ruhl’s common collaborator Les Waters, who is now the artistic director at the Actor’s Theatre of Louisville.

This production, at a much smaller and intimate space than Berkeley Rep’s Roda Theatre, is a wonderfully nuanced and intricate theatrical experience, led firmly by its principal performers and smartly directed by Kimberly Mohne Hill. It moves a tad slow in spurts, but is helped tremendously by the fact that it is a piece of highly intellectual theatre, something that continues to push forward different mores and themes as it moves through space in the two-and-a-half hours on the stage.

Catherine Givings (the delightfully staccatoed Elissa Beth Stebbins) is extremely disconnected from the two most important things in her life – her husband Dr. Givings (Jeffrey Bracco) and her newborn baby, for whom she doesn’t have enough milk supply. To further complicate matters, Dr. Givings is using his new piece of science on the lovely Sabrina Daltry (the delightfully orgasmic Sarah Moser). While both Catherine and Sabrina are bored by the love life of their husbands, science says that it must be hysteria, and certainly not the fact that the missionary position is also known as the entire sexual experience.

What continues is a further examination into the ladies’ psyche, and many issues come to the forefront, including lust, betrayal and jealousy.

What works so well about this play, is how beautiful and subtle it truly is, and how rich each critical discovery is found. Take the ill-fated attempt early on for intimacy led by Catherine. There is a chance for spontaneity, which is kinda like, “Hey, why go to the bedroom, we can get it on right here in the living room.” What follows is a kissing scene so awkward it makes a first kiss between two eighth graders look like Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh in “Gone With the Wind.”

There are other moments that do so much to create the environment – the good Doctor telling his wife he will turn around as she undresses, the way he mechanically announces that he will now wash his hands, and the fact that when she presses for a kiss as the Victorian era Sybian takes over, he is horrified and pines about how you should not let science get in the way of pleasure.

Ron Gasparinetti’s ingenious scene design does a lot to create two wholly different worlds – the world of science and the world of desire. And whichever world is in play at any moment, it does not change the fact that each character is in this world because they are searching desperately for something. Whether it’s the breakthrough science of female hysteria, a wet nurse connecting to a child that is not hers with only the milk of her own child who passed, or a feeling that there is more than one sexual position, it is Ruhl’s wonderful writing that gives the actors a fullness of character that allows them to dig in and work.

Bracco is wonderfully mechanical as the straightforward man of science, and plays him as a conflicted soul who does not desire to compromise science for pleasure. Stebbins found plenty of humor in a very funny role, and displayed a dazzling range for a complex character. Moser was illuminating as a woman who needs only an opportunity to fulfill her fantasies as a mature woman. And Elizabeth, the wet nurse played by Rachel Davidman, had a wonderful grasp on a most difficult, emotionally demanding arc, and was strongest in moments where pragmatism was the most important asset.

Ultimately, the play’s final discoveries and the way those moments are reached are tender and honest. Rather than listen to a machine with a sensual, hysteria killing hum that blows the fuses of a house that cannot hold it, it was wonderful to see each character make a very important discovery. If only the characters can truly feel a touch, or open their hearts and minds, they can find pleasure that can only be found within the soul. And no amount of fuses in a fuse box can hold that kind of power within.

**EXAMINE IT FOR YOURSELF**

City Lights Theatre Company presents ***“In the Next Room, or the Vibrator Play”***Through June 18th  
Tickets range from $15 - $35  
Tickets range from $15 - $40  
City Lights Theatre Company is located at 529 S. Second St., San Jose, CA 95112  
For tickets, call the box office at (408) 295-4200 or visit the company’s [website](http://www.cltc.org).

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