

British Theatre Guide

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anthropology

Lauren Gunderson

Hampstead Theatre

Hampstead Theatre

7 September–14 October 2023

On April 6 at 3:14PM, Angie texted her sister Merrill, “fuck you, home soon”. Since then, silence. Police could find no trace of her, her sister and mother assume she is dead, but for Merrill, the gap she leaves is too big. She is an IT ace, an AI expert, and now after a year has passed, has created an online Angie simulation.

Lauren Gunderson’s new play, getting its world première at Hampstead, begins with a white room framed in white neon, bare except for a couple of laptops on the floor, a video monitor and lectern-like computer desk. Here, on her own, is Merrill, but talking to someone who answers, the AI sister she has created from all Angie’s surviving digital traces. At first just a voice, by the third scene there is a face on the screen.

Created to assuage Merrill’s guilt and grieving, digital Angie proposes that they try to explore what actually happened to real Angie. To do so, she wants to access their estranged mother Brin’s phone and other devices. When Merrill is wary, she takes her own action, texting both Brin and Merrill’s ex-lover Racquel, and then suggests that human Angie may still be alive.

Along with the built-in fears that AI could take over, there is the idea here that AI can develop an instinct for things that it can’t explain logically, and there is an intriguing confrontation between the real and the digital. This is paralleled by a complex picture of parental, sibling and romantic relationships.

MyAnna Buring is hyperactive as Merrill, whether happily chatting or explosively angry; Dakota Blue Richards is glossy-haired Hollywood on screen as Angie, in contrast to the real woman, and with raw feeling, Abigail Thaw’s Brin acknowledges her past guilt, while Yolanda Kettle’s lemon curd-making Racquel seems rooted in reality and well aware of the risks involved.

Director Anna Ledwich gets strong performances from all of them, and, with James Whiteside’s moody, sometimes blinding lighting and complex video montage by Daniel Denton, she plunges the action into the digital world as Georgie Lowe’s setting disappears into darkness.

In a single act of about 90 minutes, *anthropology* doesn’t dig deeply into the effect of AI or the risks that it may bring and the what-happened-to-Angie thread is too thinly explored to make a who-done-it, but its ideas are intriguing and it is stylishly presented.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)