

Hum

May 16, 2012 By [Scott Meslow](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

“Do u no wot the hum is?” ask the cryptic ads for *Hum*, which had its world premiere on Monday night at the Atlas. Having seen the play, I now know what “the hum” is. But I’m still figuring out what *Hum* is – and that’s a point in the play’s favor.



In promotional materials, *Hum* has been billed as an allegory “with echoes of Orwell and Asimov.” Though the play doesn’t quite live up to the works of those dystopian-fiction giants, it finds its own voice – and its own strengths – in Theater Alliance’s well-realized production.

Hum begins with a warped pastiche of the ideal marriage. Lead characters Van (Jon Reynolds) and Eva (Kennen Sisco) wake up to perform a routine that borders on mechanical, from the identical breakfast they share each morning to the chaste kiss they exchange as Van steps out the door. But their happy habits are undercut by an endless, unsettling low hum that drowns out the ability to speak.

Van and Eva are unbothered by the noise; they’ve simply replaced the need to speak to each other with notecards, bearing shorthand phrases like “Thanx” and “I <3 U 2.” But when a mysterious stranger enlists Van in a plot to destroy the machine creating the hum, making complex verbal communication possible again, the couple finds that their world has changed – and that their lives are at risk.

Hum is a small, deliberately claustrophobic play. Of the four characters, Van and Eva are named; the remaining two – “Guard” (Greg Gallagher) and “Stranger” (Nathaniel Mendez) – exist as both independent operators and diametrically-opposed symbols of *Hum*’s dystopian world.

But the play’s fifth “character” – a mysterious, text-displaying screen which alternates between interrogating and placating both Van and the Guard – is its most important. It is, in the most literal sense, a “god from the machine,” and there’s a clear Garden of Eden parallel at play, as Van and Eva gain knowledge but lose the simplicity and idealism of their hum-filled former lives.

As for *Hum*’s hum itself, which reverberates continuously through the first third of the play, particular credit must be given to Brandon Vierra’s sound design. Sound is an important element in any play, but it’s rarely as central to the plot as it is in *Hum*, and Vierra has found a way to make the droning noise effective without it ever becoming distracting or overwhelming the other elements of the play. The hum never fully fades into the background, but you do eventually adjust to its presence, so that you – like the play’s characters – are thrown off by the sudden silence when it’s gone.

And it’s only when the hum is gone that the play’s action can truly begin. *Hum*’s setting recalls dystopian stories like George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or the Terry Gilliam film “Brazil,” but its

sharpest moments (and slyest jokes) are rooted in character. Though Van and Eva are energized and challenged by the brave new world Van has helped to create, they quickly realize that their habits and needs are no longer the same. Within days of being able to speak to one another for the first time, Van discovers the classic white lie of a person who doesn't feel like talking about something: "it's a long story." The ability to speak doesn't necessarily mean the ability to communicate, and Nicholas Wardigo's well-written script is sharp enough to note the difference.

For all the play's strengths, there's an unfortunate flaw in *Hum*'s staging: every time a character produces a message-bearing card, the audience must turn to a projection on the wall to see what the card says. It's a necessary evil, given the premise of the play, but it also means that you spend at least a portion of *Hum*'s most pivotal scenes with your eyes turned away from the action. There are also some minor kinks to be worked out; at the show I attended, there were two times when the projections were mis-timed, which rendered the play's action distractingly out of sync.

But despite these hiccups, *Hum* has an undeniable dramatic power that builds over its 90-minute runtime, and it's well worth seeing the play to experience its strengths for yourself. By the time you reach *Hum*'s dreamlike, almost expressionistic ending, the play's spell has fully been cast. And like any good piece of dystopian fiction, you'll walk away from the theater reflecting on the horrors of the play's world – and just how closely they reflect the horrors of ours.

Theater Alliance's production of *Hum* is onstage thru June 3, 2012 at The Atlas Performing Arts Center, 1333 H Street NE, Washington, DC.

[Details](#)

[Tickets](#)

Hum

Written by Nicholas Wardigo

Directed by Colin Hovde and Nathaniel Mendez

Produced by Theater Alliance

Reviewed by Scott Meslow

Recommended

Running time: One hour and thirty minutes with no intermission



‘Hum’ at Theater Alliance by Joel Markowitz

Posted on [May 18, 2012](#) by [Joel Markowitz](#)



Tired of all those revivals and multiple productions of classics all around town? Then hop into your Hummer and drive over to Theater Alliance at [Atlas Performing Arts Center](#) and see the world premiere of Nicholas Wardigo’s *Hum*, directed by Theater Alliance Artistic Director Colin Hovde and Theater Alliance. It’s weird and entertaining stuff and *Twilight Zone-ish*, where silence is golden and over-speaking can get you in a heap of a lot of trouble. Shh!

As I enter the intimate ‘in the square’ space in The Lab Theater II, I could hear the electronic/disco-y pulse of the music, and that ‘hum’ started filling my ears. Supplied by Sound

Designer Brandon Vierra, the hum and the other sound effects he provides during the production are key ‘characters’ in the play. I have very sensitive hearing (don’t even think of unwrapping a piece of candy near me in the theatre!) and that pulsating, almost heart-pumping hum never left my ears in the 90 minutes I sat there, and on my long journey home on the Metro.

Set Designer Robbie Hayes immediately makes his point when you enter the theater that everything in Van and Eva’s marriage and lives is simply ‘black and white’ and quite stale. There’s a white bed, a white table, 2 white end tables and a black and white checkerboard table cloth, and checkerboard tiles on their floor. And Van and Eva communicate by holding up notes (Post-its I think). The writing on these notes are projected by Hayes and his Assistant Patrick Lord on ‘screens’ which forces the audience to turn and read them (like surtitles at the opera) – like ‘Hi’ and ‘Thanx’ and other objects of short affection. Let’s just say that it’s a smart way to keep the audience involved and this effective technique is ‘well noted.’

On the other side of the space is a long counter top on what looks like a large bar, but you will have to come see the show to find out what this really is. Kyle Grant’s lighting design effectively sets all the changing moods, while Heather Lockard dresses them simply. (What did you expect? They live a simple life).

I am glued to my seat watching Wardigo’s fascinating new work and these wonderful performances by Jon Reynolds (Van) and Kennen Sisco (Eva), who are ably supported by the equally quiet Greg



Gallagher (“Guard”) and Nathaniel Mendez (“Stranger”).

Van and Eva have a ‘robotic and mechanical’ married life, and we instantly get an eery taste of it as they lay in their bed motionless and emotionless and ‘dead-like’ as we enter the theater. I watched Sisco and Reynolds for 15 minutes and they never moved. Now that’s great acting – or badly stiff joints.

That annoying hum has drowned out any likelihood of normal communication for Van and Ava, but when the hum is buzzing no more, things change – and let’s just say that Eva bites off more than she can chew. The play becomes *All About Eva*, and when she starts talking and tinkering with glasses, we’re all in for a ‘bumpy ride.’

Reynolds’ Van is Buster Keaton-like in the ‘silent’ portion of play, and his body communicates with every jerk and move – better than when he actually gets to speak.

Sisco is hysterical in the ‘sound section’ as she grows louder by the minute, and as her brain swells with new-found knowledge, she becomes obnoxious to the ‘core.’ And this is where Directors Hovde and Mendez deserve some credit by not turning Eva and Van into cartoon characters. Through their changes – the good, the bad and the obnoxious – these are real people with some real problems that – most probably – not even a great therapist could help them change.

See that below this? I don’t have the answer. The important question should be: “Wot Happened 2 Ava and Van When The Hum Went Kaput?” And for that answer you need to see this production to find out.

Theater Alliance’s production of *Hum* is a ‘hum-dinger’ of a cool time in the theater. Don’t miss it!

[Hum](#) plays through June 3, 2012 at Theater Alliance at June 3, 2012 at Atlas Performing Arts Center – 1333 H Street NE, in Washington, DC. For tickets, purchase them [online](#). More details [here](#).



**WOT
HAPPENED
2 THE
HUM?**

Theatre Review: ‘Hum’ at Theater Alliance

May 23, 2012 By [Erica Shadowsong](#)

“do u no wot the hum is?”

Like Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* and George Orwell’s *1984*, *HUM* is a look at a dystopia of modern times, investigating what happens



when our ability to express ourselves in the myriad of words language provides is taken away...and replaced by a persistent drone that drowns out all thought. Written by Nicholas Wardigo and directed by Colin Hovde and Nathaniel Mendez, this world premiere is being presented by Theater Alliance at the Atlas Performing Arts Center from May 12-June 2.

Relying completely on a cast of four, *HUM* is set in a semi-futuristic, alternative modern world in which people communicate briefly with note cards and fleeting facial expressions, while a pervasive, throbbing drone blocks out any other sound in their world. Van (Jon Reynolds) and Eva (Kennen Sisco) are an apparently happy couple living a life composed of silent, comical routines. Van goes to work every day to work as a mechanic on a mysterious box, a job for which he must have his bag checked by a security officer on his way in and out.

One day, while riding on the subway, a strange man asks him, through use of a note card, “do u no wot the hum is?” Van doesn’t know, but is tormented by the question; perhaps the first original one he’s seen in who knows how long. The man gives him a large book—a dictionary—and suddenly, Van has found all these words for nuances of feeling he never knew existed. But it’s not until something happens to the machine that makes the hum that their world really begins to turn upside-down...

This production is quite original in its attempts to tackle an oft-revisited premise, when it comes to dystopic social commentaries. The set design and projection, by Robbie Hayes, is impressive and unique: Screens on either side of the theater-in-the-round set-up display the text-speak messages that are on the note cards for the audience to see, complete with accompanying “alert” sounds. A pulsing drone fills the room, palpable in its power. Props and set are creatively used by the actors, who otherwise gesture emphatically in mime for much of the show.

Hokey at times, the mood seems a little unpredictable; the underlying tone is ominous and serious, but there are breaks and jokes for which I sometimes felt unprepared, because I spent much of the time waiting for something awful to happen. The material is difficult, and Sisco and Jon handle it well, moving at times with a hint of dance-like grace during the silent portions. In places, there is a stark contrast between the lighthearted portrayal by the actors and the danger that overshadows them; this has an endearing quality for the characters, however. Greg Gallegher is terrifying as the silent, Gestapo-style guard, and Nathaniel Mendez, silent throughout, plays an intriguing stranger. Two of my favorite parts of the show are the mysterious, unknown presence behind the computer screen that commands the guard, and the poignant language play as Van and Eva taste different words to describe their awakened senses.

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Although some might appreciate a shorter production now and then, I experienced this one as being a little rushed...perhaps because once words came onto the picture and Van and Eva really began to express themselves, I wanted time to listen and process all they were describing. The ending, which has some appropriate ambiguity, seemed to come too quickly.

I highly recommend *HUM* for anyone interested in literature, censorship, science, and texting!Running Time: 90 minutes

Hum plays through June 3, 2012 at Theater Alliance at June 3, 2012 at Atlas Performing Arts Center, 1333 H Street NE, in Washington, DC. For tickets, purchase them [online](#).

‘Hum’ from Theater Alliance fails to deliver on promising premise

By Nelson Pressley, Published: May 20 The Washington Post



Nicholas Wardigo’s new play “Hum” is a dystopian drama about how technology has us in its clutches. Ironically, “Hum” is at its best when technology has Wardigo’s play in its clutches. Given the freedom to speak, it hardly knows how.

In its mini-bursts of tweet- and text-style utterances, though, “Hum” is onto something, and the savvy Theater Alliance production at the Atlas Performing Arts Center saturates you in a futuristic milieu that’s recognizable.

Sound designer Brendon Vierra creates a brilliant, ever-shifting hum — the perpetual background noise of the title — that’s like a combination of “[Star Wars](#)” lightsaber droning and sonar pings. Van and Eva, a husband and wife, don’t even try to talk over this aural wash. They “talk” in prewritten flashcards with banalities such as “Coffee?” and “Thanx.” The audience reads those communiques, and the exchanges Van has with a nameless stranger on a train, on a grid work of screens that Robbie Hayes uses for his sophisticated projections.

No one speaks through the first half of the play, but the production — co-directed by Colin Hovde, Theater Alliance’s artistic director, and Nathaniel Mendez, who plays the stranger — is one of the more immersive sensory experiences onstage now. As Van and Eva, Jon Reynolds and Kennen Sisco make cheerful but strict dances of the husband-and-wife routines (breakfast, work, dinner, bed). Reynolds and Sisco do the futuristic plastic people bit very well, and costume designer Heather Lockard has seen to it that even their shoes don’t make noise, adding to their unreality. In this terse, rote world, the slightest verbal variation becomes electric with possibility.

The conflict comes from the stranger, who jolts Van by asking (via a scrawl on a scrap of paper), “Do u no wot the hum is?” Van doesn’t know, but he’s intrigued, and “Hum” turns toward noir. Mendez’s stranger, in trench coat and fedora, sparks a plot that gets Van thumbing madly through the dictionary — so many new words! — and conspiring to stop the hum.

At that point, Wardigo seems stumped. With the hum and its unmistakable metaphors, Wardigo creates a gripping theatrical reflection of our moment. But Van’s and Eva’s naive stammering and soupy theorizing once they talk seem less about the poignancy of their situation than about a playwright who’s not sure how to drive his scenario home.

So the show’s thrilling nonverbal tango, a taut mix of sound, light and movement against the right angles of Hayes’s black-and-white set design, gives way to Wardigo’s self-conscious dialogue and too-earnest acting by Reynolds and Sisco. The play gets caught between being abstruse and cliched, and Wardigo can’t find a way out.

His way in, though, is a wonderful brain-tickler, and at Saturday's matinee, the theme played out in the audience as a woman in the front row spent most of the show texting. Perhaps she was asking the Internet if it nos wot the hum is.

Hum

by Nicholas Wardigo. Directed by Colin Hovde and Nathaniel Mendez. Lights, Kyle Grant; associate set and projections design, Patrick Lord. With Greg Gallagher. About 90 minutes. Through June 2 at the Atlas Performing Arts Center, 1333 H St. NE. 202-241-2539. theateralliance.com.

Last Chance: Theater Alliance's *Hum*, Reviewed

Posted by [Rebecca J. Ritzel](#) on May. 26, 2012 at 11:27 am

For the first 30 minutes of the world-premiere play *Hum*, Theater Alliance challenges Synetic Theater in the race to create the best dialogue-free drama in D.C. There's well-crafted choreography, an engrossing electronic soundscape, and attractive actors in their underclothes.

And then the characters in *Hum* start talking, and it's no longer much of a contest. But in first half-hour, playwright **Nicholas Wardigo** really has you going, drawing in the audience with palpable suspense, his stage directions rendered credibly by the cast and crew at Theater Alliance.

Sound, lighting and technical design are the stars here. Playing supporting roles are that Intro to Philosophy book that's been collecting dust since freshman year, and your used-bookstore copy of *1984*. The show's premise, at least initially, is to explore pivotal questions in linguistic philosophy, like: Can concepts exist without words to describe them? And does limiting language limit original thought? Fans of Austrian philosopher **Ludwig Wittgenstein** should come see the show and hold talk-backs at the biergarten up the street.

But for the rest of us theatergoers, the question at hand is whether Wardigo can turn esoteric aphorisms into an original and erudite entertainment. And he can't. Not for a full 90 minutes, anyway. Van and Eva, the play's main characters, live in a world where "the Hum" prohibits people from speaking, and written communication is limited to truncated messages prewritten on flash cards. Their days unfold in perfect symmetry. He's lying flat on his side of the bed; she's on hers. They dress together, drink coffee together, synchronously stab spears of broccoli together at dinner. And yet **Jon Reynolds** and **Kennen Sisco** also convince viewers that their limited existence is a pleasant one, and that they sincerely love each other, even if their displays of affection are limited to peckish kisses and flash cards that say "I [Heart] U."

Then one day their simple reverie is interrupted by a stranger, in a sinister fedora and sunglasses, who starts stalking Van on the subway. "do u no wot the hum is?" he asks. (As he holds up a card, the wording is projected on the back wall of the theater.) Van doesn't. But he aids and abets the mysterious stranger, and distracts the security guard at work. A rather elaborate bit of pantomime follows, and we are later told—once Van and Eva learn how to talk—that the stranger has "broken" the Hum.

The cessation of the Hum may be liberating for Van and Eva, but for the audience, the introduction of dialogue (and disappearance of the soothing drone) is like the interruption of a fascinating dream. What remains is a mish-mash of the dystopian tropes explored by the likes of **George Orwell**, **Terry Gilliam**, and **Margaret Atwood**. Big Brother is here, oppressing the masses through the text-message vernacular of a teenage girl. (During pauses, the projections are phrases like "thx for waiting. u will b ok.") There's some sort of police state afoot, as represented by the violent security guard. And Eva, originally something of a Stepford Wife, evolves into a performance artist once she's free to make noise.

Van and Eva's marriage is initially threatened by verbal communication, and her ability to finally say, "Take out the trash!" The couple's relationship deepens in spurts, and the play would benefit from a sharper focus on their efforts to communicate. Instead, we get just brief glimpses of humor and humanity. Wardigo would rather his audience fixate on the details of his dystopian who-dun-it. Which is too bad, because by emphasizing the overwrought plot, he traps fascinating characters in totalitarian clichés.

Theater Alliance presents Hum, directed by Colin Hovde and Nathaniel Mendez, at Atlas Performing Arts Center to June 2. \$20-\$35. Ticketing information [here](#).