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Still image from Sin Eaters

Eating the Sins of Others

by Kristen Shahverdian

[Theatre Philadelphia](#) and [thINKingDANCE](#) continue our partnership, begun in 2018, bringing coverage and new perspectives to Philadelphia's vibrant theatre scene.

I never really thought about the people who clean horrific images off the internet, but after watching *Sin Eaters*, I do. Written by Anna Moench and directed by Matt Pfeiffer, [Theatre Exile](#) streamed the premiere for a two-week run.

The play opens in a small, dingy living room in the Staten Island apartment of Mary Lee (Bi Jean Ngo) and Derek (David M. Raine). Mary and Derek are sitting at their table, celebrating her new job with a tech company. "Big Tech!!" they exclaim in happiness, tinged with apprehension.

Ngo and Raine nail the fragility of a relationship, particularly when money, career, and the future are all rolled into one conversation. Their excitement about the job hits a few hiccups. Mary cannot tell Derek the specifics of her tech job, and as she nudges Derek to return to his catering career they get close to a fight, but then find their way back to their celebration. They are affectionate yet reserved, a line between them that grows as the play continues.

The play takes place in two locations: their living room and Mary's cubicle at work. The scenes switch between locations and it is when Mary is at work that the play's darker themes unfold. We learn that Mary is a [scrubber](#) for Between Us, a social media site where people post anonymously. Mary's job is to delete illegal content, but because the content is posted anonymously, she can only remove the content; there are no consequences for the perpetrators. The sign behind Mary's desk pokes fun at corporate camaraderie. The list of the many things to be scrubbed—pornography, child abuse, rape, sexual abuse, etc. —is followed by "Go Team!" While acting as a cheerleader for the scrubbers, the company is dedicated to the ideal of the anonymous individual's right to post almost anything.

We watch Mary staring at the screen as she recounts what she sees: naked body parts, animal cruelty, sexual abuse, and violence. Predominant among the images, as she repeats, are "Dick, dick, dick." Ngo reports on the images deadpan; we can see how mundane they become as she easily repeats, "Delete, delete, delete."

But things quickly turn when she sees a particularly horrifying image of someone she knows—or thinks she knows. Mary pulls back from her seat, her hand covers her mouth, she leans in, checking again as if saying, "Am I really seeing this?"

Sin Eaters exposes an intentionally hidden job. The play deals with the construct, one created and perpetuated by tech companies, that in deleting these images, we can pretend they never existed. Ngo's depiction of the images ranges from matter of fact to humorous to gruesome. Clearly there are a lot of dick pictures on the internet. But when she sees something horrific I recoil as well. Some of the descriptions are graphic and truly awful, but in recounting what she sees, Mary forces us to know that they exist. We follow Mary throughout the play, she is our eyes into her world. This view is like being on a video call with her, and it brings me closer to her. I trust her.

The film alternates between two views: a "real-life" camera in full color that mimics the screen view and a bluish-tinted film shot from an overhead angle, like a security camera. In a quick sleight of hand Derek turns the camera on and it is unclear if Mary knows it exists, giving us an early clue to a shady side of Derek. The camera change happens throughout the play and it sets an uneasy tone that builds towards the play's final scene.

The characters' descent into horror gives *Sin Eaters* the feel of a psychological thriller peppered with satire. What happens to the people who eat our sins? Mary's job affects her to the point that I worry for her. Did she really see that image? David M. Raine plays all the additional characters in the play; a device that works well to capture Mary's confusion as all the people she sees on-screen begin to morph into each other. Can Mary trust Derek? Has he done what she thinks she saw?

Mary's mental state and physical home are both imploding. Her upstairs neighbors are increasingly loud and aggressive. Her nerves are shot. She paces her living room, her energy darts all over, she is jumpy. The security angle view adds to the feeling of distortion and confusion—as if the camera itself reflects her mind.

Sin Eaters reveals the work of scrubbers and internet content. After watching the play, what continues to gnaw at me is that feeling of being sure we see something but cannot prove it. Truth no longer matters. It is our experience, and how do you scrub that away?

[Sin Eaters](#), Theatre Exile, streaming online, Feb. 11-March 7.

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February 27, 2021