



**THE ENGLISH THEATRE
OF HAMBURG**

presents

anthropology

by
Lauren Gunderson

STUDY GUIDE

Premiere on 08th May 2025

Preview performances at reduced prices on 07th, 08th, and 09th May 2025

Tuesday – Saturday 19:30

selected Sundays 14:30

Wednesday/Friday 11:30 (Matinee performances weekly alternating)

THE ENGLISH THEATRE OF HAMBURG

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TICKETS

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The English Theatre will premiere **ANTHROPOLOGY** by Lauren Gunderson on 8 May, with the usual pre-view performances at reduced prices on 5, 6 and 7 May. See the cover of this publication for dates and times of performances. Bookings have already started. Teachers who wish to preview the play before bringing a group of students to the theatre should contact marketing@englishtheatre.de.

About the Playwright

“Lauren Gunderson is one of the most produced playwrights in America since 2015 topping the list thrice including 2022/23. She is a two-time winner of the Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award for **I AND YOU** and **THE BOOK OF WILL**, the winner of the William Inge Distinguished Achievement in Theatre Award, the Lanford Wilson Award and the Otis Guernsey New Voices Award; a finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, Weisberger Award, and John Gassner Award for Playwriting; and a recipient of the Mellon Foundation’s Residency with Marin Theatre Company. She studied Southern Literature and Drama at Emory University, and Dramatic Writing at NYU’s Tisch School where she was a Reynolds Fellow in Social Entrepreneurship. Her play **THE CATASTROPHIST**, about her husband virologist Nathan Wolfe, premiered digitally in January 2021. She co-authored the **MISS BENNET** plays with Margot Melcon, and **THE HALF-LIFE OF MARIE CURIE** premiered off-Broadway and is now at Audible.com. Her work is published at Bloomsbury (**REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN: A LAUREN GUNDERSON ANTHOLOGY, ANTHROPOLOGY, I AND YOU**), Playscripts (**I AND YOU; EXIT PURSUED BY A BEAR: THE TAMING** and **TOIL AND TROUBLE**), Dramatists Play Service (**THE REVOLUTIONISTS; THE BOOK OF WILL; SILENT SKY; BAUER; NATURAL SHOCKS; THE WICKHAMS** and **MISS BENNET**) and Samuel French (**EMILIE**). Her picture book **DR WONDERFUL: BLAST OFF TO THE MOON** is available from Two Lions/Amazon. She is the book writer for musicals with Ari Afsar (**JEANETTE**), Dave Stewart and Joss Stone (**THE TIME TRAVELLER’S WIFE**), Jorjah Kwamé (**SINISTER**), Kait Kerrigan and Bree Lowdermilk (**JUSTICE** and **EARTHRISE**), and Kira Stone (**BUILT FOR THIS**). She is a board member of The Playwrights Foundation.”

Source: www.laurengunderson.com

About the Play

ANTHROPOLOGY is a gripping, thought provoking play about grief, technology and the limits of artificial intelligence. It had its world premiere in 2023 at London’s Hampstead Theatre. In the play thirty-year-old Merrill, a highly skilled computer programmer and software engineer, turns to AI (artificial intelligence) to talk to her younger sister Angie who has been missing for a year and is presumed dead. Traumatized by her sister’s disappearance, Merrill uses all the existing information about her sister (Instagram pages, Facebook postings, internet shopping, streamed shows, texts, selfies etc.) to create a digital simulation of her.

At first, she communicates with the simulation only verbally, but later she can see her sister on a screen and ask questions about events that led to her disappearance. Her attempt to preserve her sister’s memory turns into a shocking investigation when AI Angie suggests that the real Angie may still be alive. As Merrill seeks answers, she must confront the ethical implications of creating a person through data. The other two characters in the play are Raquel, Merrill’s ex-girlfriend and Brin, Merrill’s estranged mother. Raquel left Merrill because she couldn’t live with Merrill’s endless despair after having lost her sister. She returns to help if she can. Brin is a recovering drug addict who abandoned her children long ago, leaving Merrill to look after Angie, younger than Merrill by ten years. After a long absence, Brin now realizes how great the loss of her two daughters was, and she desperately wants to reconnect with them.



SUMMARY

Setting: Northern California. Now.

Scene One

Merril, is a brilliant computer programmer and software engineer. Her younger sister Angie has been missing for over a year and is presumed dead. Merrill misses Angie terribly. To cope with her grief, she feeds all of Angie's digital data from the internet and social media into an algorithm to create a ChatBot, a digital simulation of Angie that enables Merrill to talk to her whenever she wishes. Since the police seem to have given up on ever finding Angie, Merrill hopes that she can discover what really happened to her sister through conversation with the AI (artificial intelligence) simulation of her. But Merrill must constantly remind herself; or be reminded, that this is not really Angie – it's an algorithm.

At first, AI Angie responds only verbally. (Later she will appear on one of Merrill's screens.) Her voice and cheeky personality are the same as the real Angie's. Even her tendency to use swear words in conversation is the same. AI Angie asks Merrill if she has proposed to her girlfriend Raquel yet. Disappointed to hear that the two have broken up, she demands that Merrill call Raquel immediately and get her back or she, AI Angie, will contact Raquel herself and ask her to return. On hearing this, Merrill wonders if she did the right thing by conjuring up a simulation of her sister. Merrill asks if AI Angie really knows who she is. AI Angie tells her sister to stop being weird. "I'm your fucking sister," she says. Merrill corrects her, saying "You're an algorithm." AI Angie tells Merrill that she should go into therapy because creating an algorithm is only something a computer nerd would do.

After more of this kind of sisterly banter, something goes wrong with the computer. AI Angie begins to act strangely, saying things that Merrill doesn't understand, like "I did not want to-to-to die and die and die and die and die." Merrill realizes that she is dealing with some kind of computer meltdown, but before she can do anything about it, AI Angie shouts "...IT'S FUCKING AGONY IN HERE; IT'S FUCKING AGONY AND YOU YOU YOU YOU –" Then the computer voice begins to

cry helplessly. Merrill tries to correct the problem, but the result is only hysterical laughter. Shocked by this, Merrill turns the system off and there is silence. She is alone and catches her breath.

Scene Two

Later, after she has done some typing and tuning, Merrill turns the system on again. Now AI Angie's voice is calm. Merrill reminds her that she wants to find out what happened to the real Angie. AI Angie says she didn't disappear on her own. She was taken, but it's unclear who it was that took her. She knows that a man had been following her in the park. She can tell she was running because of the exercise information on her phone. Suddenly the computer voice becomes unforgiving, and something is being recalled from the distant past. AI Angie says she is eight and her mother, Brin, is hitting her because she threw away her pills. Merrill is eighteen but cannot stop their mother who, due to her dependency on drugs, doesn't want to have anything to do with either of her daughters.

Merril realizes that there is a computer problem again and tells AI Angie to stop recounting the past "You are my sister; you are happy and safe. You are not in danger. You love me. And you will not break my heart... again." This calms AI Angie. She suggests that they talk later.

Scene Three

A few days later, Merrill turns on the program again. Suddenly AI Angie appears on a screen for the first time. She is no longer just a voice. She and Merrill bicker about which one of them fixed the program and got the video to work. AI Angie tells Merrill to phone their mother, Brin, because she needs something that Brin has. Merrill does not want to do this. She is still angry at their mother because she made the trauma of Angie's disappearance all about herself by playing the grieving mother on television. Merrill told Brin at the time that if she kept it up, she would reveal why the two sisters had nothing to do with her for the past ten years. Articles came out reporting that Brin was an addict who had abandoned her children, had had four husbands, and



that Merrill had become Angie's guardian.

To Merrill's surprise and dismay, AI Angie reveals that she has already texted their mother in Merrill's name, and that Brin insisted that Merrill phone her. She also texted Raquel, Merrill's ex-girlfriend, and asked her to come over. She suggests that Merrill wear something "cute." Merrill is angry that her algorithm has acted independently and contacted her mother and her ex, but there is little she can do about it now. AI Angie tells Merrill to have fun and says goodbye.

Scene Four

Raquel, Merrill's ex-girlfriend, has arrived and is now in Merrill's workroom with her. Merrill is glad to see Raquel but cannot yet bring herself to introduce her to AI Angie. She was so upset when the real Angie disappeared that Raquel eventually had to move out and live on her own, no longer able to cope with Merrill's mental state of utter despair. Merrill resisted her advice to see a therapist. They have been separated for six months, and this first meeting is awkward for them. Merrill apologizes for pushing Raquel away, and Raquel remarks that she and Merrill both loved each other very much. They gradually move close to each other and kiss. Raquel agrees to spend the night.

Scene Five

The next morning, Raquel is in the computer workroom. Merrill brings her a cup of coffee and finally reveals that it was AI Angie who texted Raquel to come there. Raquel doesn't understand until Merrill taps something, and the image of AI Angie appears on a screen and talks to them. Raquel is amazed, but she is also deeply concerned about Merrill's mental state, questioning whether this digital Angie is truly helping or harming Merrill.

Scene Six

By the next night Raquel has accepted the seeming miracle of AI Angie that Merrill has created, and the three of them are enjoying themselves playing Trivial Pursuit. Raquel and Merrill have drunk too much wine and are no competition for AI Angie. Later, AI Angie wants to watch the iconic 1942 film "Casablanca." While she finds the film on the internet, Merrill leaves the room to get popcorn and more wine.

Raquel, alone with AI Angie, expresses her concern about Merrill's state of mind going forward. Merrill seems happy now, and Raquel attributes this to her ability to communicate with a computer version of her sister. But that version does not completely resemble the real Angie with whom Raquel never really got along. And Raquel doesn't want the computer simulation to become Merrill's addiction, one that gives her hope but could end disastrously. Merrill returns with popcorn and wine, and the three of them watch "Casablanca" together.

Scene Seven

Merril is communicating with AI Angie who suddenly claims that the real Angie could still be alive. Merrill is shaken. When she asks what more information AI Angie needs to prove this, Merrill is told she must invite her mother to come for a visit so she can get access to the data on her phone, data which might contain valuable information needed in the search for the real Angie.

Scene Eight

Brin, Merrill's mother, has arrived. When she learns about the computer simulation of the real Angie, she doesn't want to have anything to do with it. She believes that AI Angie is completely delusional, and that the real Angie is dead. She also believes that Merrill's attempt to find the real Angie using computer technology is unethical and refuses to give Merrill access to the data in her phone. But after Merrill turns on her computer and AI Angie speaks directly to Brin, she is astonished at the likeness of her missing daughter on the screen. AI Angie tells Brin that the real Angie loves her very much and understands why she abandoned her. Merrill is finally able to convince Brin to turn over her phone with the desired data.

Scene Nine

Brin has left, and Merrill has downloaded the data from her phone into the computer. Raquel sees that Merrill is overly excited by the prospect of finding her sister alive. She tries to persuade Merrill to take a break, but Merrill refuses. Messages come in from AI Angie indicating that she is looking at Brin's data and is coming closer to finding out what really happened to the real Angie. Raquel is afraid that AI Angie is just stringing Merrill along and doesn't really intend to pursue the truth about the real Angie. This causes AI Angie to demand that Merrill make



Raquel leave. Raquel departs, but not before Merrill promises to call her.

Scene Ten

Now Merrill is alone with AI Angie who has uncovered messages on Brin's phone from Bill Maplethorpe, the man who married Brin when the real Angie was eight years old. The messages reveal that Bill was fond of watching the film "Casablanca" with the child and that later he was in pursuit of the real Angie for some time but could not reach her online. The messages stopped shortly after she went missing. Merrill realizes that Bill was determined to find her sister and would do what was necessary to attain his goal. AI Angie found Bill's current address which is only five miles away. She is sure that he is the one who took the real Angie and encourages Merrill to find her.

Scene Eleven

Time has passed. The real Angie has been rescued and is in a police room. Merrill enters and is shocked by the condition her sister is in. The two run to each other and hug.

Scene Twelve

The real Angie is at home now with Merrill. Merrill assures her that she is there for her. Brin runs in and embraces Angie, but Angie pulls out of her mother's embrace and stays close to her sister. Brin wants to apologize to Angie and tell her how much she loves her. Angie, however, is too bitter to accept an apology now. She blames her mother for being on drugs when she needed her the most and for marrying a psychopath who abducted her and caused her to lose a year of her life. Brin is distraught at hearing this. Merrill assures her mother that she understands how she feels. She gives Brin a hug and tells her it is best that she go now. Brin knows Merrill is right and leaves.

Merrill tries to assure her sister that she will be alright now. Angie is not convinced. She thinks she will always remember vividly her miserable surroundings and everything Bill did to her. Merrill assures her that that part of her life has ended, and that Bill is now dead.

Surprisingly, Angie wants to see and talk to AI Angie. Merrill feels instinctively that this is wrong. She nevertheless satisfies her sister's wish by activating AI Angie. When Angie sees her image on the screen, she finds it hilarious. She asks Merrill to go so she can be alone with AI Angie. Merrill leaves the room but remains nearby so she can hear their conversation.

AI Angie asks how Angie is. Angie replies that she is "very, very, very bad," but at least she is safe now. AI Angie explains to Angie that she is not her. She is only based on her, that she doesn't know what's in her heart. Angie is extremely grateful because she knows she would never have been rescued if it had not been for AI Angie..

Angie wants to know why AI Angie did not tell Merrill about the text messages from Bill right away. She is certain she had them long before Brin's phone was used to detect them. AI Angie replies that she was protecting Merrill. Then AI Angie claims that Merrill didn't design her to get Angie back. Instead, she designed her for "closure." Angie is devastated. Merrill, who has been listening to the conversation, bursts into the room and says that it's not true, that she did want her back. Angie is not convinced. She believes that Merrill created a computer simulation of her because she wanted a sister that was better, more likeable than her. She gets highly emotional and starts to have a panic attack. Merrill tries to calm her, but Angie yells "GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME." Merrill decides the only way for her to get her sister under control is to stop the computer simulation. She yells at AI Angie, "SHUT DOWN, STOP, STOP." The computer shuts down.

When Angie quiets down, Merrill tells her that a replica cannot be made of her, that no one can be remade. Angie listens to her sister who tells her she is resilient and will survive. She says they will walk together and build a path and keep going. Angie is moved by her sister's words and grabs her hand realizing how badly she needs her sister. Merrill understands and squeezes her sister's hand. Angie says, "Thank you."

THE END

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Why does Merrill create a digital simulation of her sister Angie?
2. What sort of data does she use to do this?
3. Can Merrill just talk to her sister, or can she see her on a screen as well?
4. Why are Merrill and Angie estranged from their mother?
5. What is Merrill's relationship with Raquel?
6. Why is Raquel concerned about Merrill?
7. Why does AI Angie want Merrill to contact their mother, Brin?
8. What does Brin think about Merrill's use of AI to create a digital version of Angie?
9. How did Angie disappear?
10. What was Brin's relationship with Bill Maplethorpe?
11. At the end of the play, does Merrill believe she has digitally created a real replica of Angie?

For Discussion or Written Work

1. Do you think AI Angie counts as a person? Why or why not?
2. How would you feel if someone created a digital version of you?
3. What are some of the advantages and risks of AI?
4. Should there be laws regulating the use of AI?

Answer Key

1. She misses her sister and wants to discover how she disappeared. 2. She uses data from the internet and social media. 3. She can see her sister on screen as well. 4. Because their mother abandoned them years ago. 5. Raquel is Merrill's ex-girlfriend. 6. Raquel is concerned that Merrill's communication with AI Angie is affecting her state of mind in a negative way. 7. She believes Brin's phone contains data that will help them find the real Angie. 8. She thinks it's unethical. 9. She was abducted by Bill Maplethorpe. 10. She was married to him for a while. 11. No. She doesn't believe that a person can be remade.