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New play explores what search reveals about us

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The Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA - They are an unquestionably bizarre set of Internet search terms: Mange. Human mold. White camellia. Dying Elmo.

Could those words also be clues to finding a missing person?

That's the premise behind "User 927," a new production in Philadelphia that blends fact and fiction in the tale of a disappearance from a small Midwestern town.

"It's the world's first play based on a search log," director Michael Alltop said.

The story's central clue is the real-life online search log of an AOL subscriber, identified only as User 927, that was released to the public two years ago in a well-publicized privacy gaffe.

Alltop said he was astonished when AOL intentionally released some 19 million search requests made over three months by more than 650,000 subscribers. The logs were meant to help academic researchers, but they were posted on a public site and quickly circulated once a blogger discovered them.

Although AOL had substituted numeric IDs for the subscribers' real user names, there were enough clues for The New York Times and The Washington Post to track down two of the users and identify them by name.

The identity of User 927 is still unknown. But Alltop was fascinated enough by that subscriber's freakish queries, including some disturbing sexual imagery, to commission a 90-minute play around the search log.

Alltop's friend, 30-year-old writer Katharine Clark Gray, crafted a story of a mother and her teenage daughter who move from Brooklyn, N.Y., to fictional Osterville, Ind., in search of a simpler life.

Shortly after arriving in their new home, Mom declares an "analog" summer for the two of them, no Internet, no e-mail, no computer.



Michele Guidry, center left, as "Leah Letts" and Emilie Krause as Letts' 14-year-old daughter "Deena" rehearses Brat Productions' "User 927" in Philadelphia, Wednesday, June 4, 2008. Performances are scheduled to run June 11-22 at The Studio at St. Stephen's Theater, an intimate venue in a downtown Philadelphia church basement. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)



Director Michael Alltop and playwright Katharine Clark Gray are seen during a rehearsal of Brat Productions' "User 927" in Philadelphia, Wednesday, June 4, 2008. Performances are scheduled to run June 11-22 at The Studio at St. Stephen's Theater, an intimate venue in a downtown Philadelphia church basement. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

But daughter Deena, 14, sneaks off to the public library and uses a computer there. With two friends she quickly makes online, Deena begins exploring an actual Web site that has copies of the AOL search logs, one of many created in the aftermath of the release.

Audience members see the queries on screens overhead as Deena and her friends delve into the logs, getting a glimpse into the lives of some users. The trio's interest in User 927 was piqued because previous visitors to the site had given that log high ratings.

"It's time-travel spying," Deena says during her amateur sleuthing.

Their searches in the library become important later when someone from Osterville disappears; Alltop does not want to reveal who.

Previews of Brat Productions' "User 927" run through Sunday. Regular performances run June 11-22 at The Studio at St. Stephen's Theater, an intimate venue in a downtown Philadelphia church basement.

In real life, AOL has apologized for the search logs' release, which the Time Warner Inc. division blamed on a researcher who had failed to gain proper clearances. The researcher and another AOL employee were fired, and the company's chief technology officer resigned.

But the continued existence of the logs, and people's interest in them, leads to the play's key question: Are you what you seek?

Fictional investigators must grapple with that issue as they try to find the missing person by tracing User 927's identity.

"This search log, to me, is a character," Alltop said. "It's like a guided tour through a polluted mind."

Gray, the playwright who this week was awarded a Pew Fellowship in the Arts for Philadelphia-area artists, said the story is about the analog and technological connections people make in their lives. The mother-daughter bond "is 100 percent analog," she said, but it is also perhaps the strongest connection two people can have.

Steve Jones, a communications professor at the University of Illinois in Chicago, sees validity in exploring whether you are what you seek. He questions whether one's personality can really be gleaned from one's searches, noting that when retail sites like Amazon.com Inc. recommend products based on past queries, they are not always on the mark.



Director Michael Alltop, is seen during a rehearsal of Brat Productions' "User 927" in Philadelphia, Wednesday, June 4, 2008. Performances are scheduled to run June 11-22 at The Studio at St. Stephen's Theater, an intimate venue in a downtown Philadelphia church basement. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

The concept of "User 927" continues a pattern of integrating technology into the arts, Jones added. Analog communication devices served as creative fodder when they were newly invented, such as plays centered on a telephone or poetry written to resemble telegraphs, he said.

Jones said they all show "the degree to which the public's imagination is captured by these technologies."



Playwright Katharine Clark Gray is seen during rehearsal of Brat Productions' "User 927" in Philadelphia, Wednesday, June 4, 2008. Performances are scheduled to run June 11-22 at The Studio at

Michele Guidry as "Leah Letts" rehearses Brat Productions' "User 927" in Philadelphia, Wednesday, June 4, 2008. Performances are scheduled to run June 11-22 at The Studio at St. Stephen's Theater, an intimate venue in a downtown Philadelphia church basement. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)



Michele Guidry as "Leah Letts" Director Michael Alltop, left works with cast members Conrad Ricamora, center, and Elena Bossler, right, during a rehearsal of Brat Productions' "User 927" in Philadelphia, Wednesday, June 4, 2008. Performances are scheduled to run June 11-22 at The Studio at St. Stephen's Theater, an intimate venue in a downtown Philadelphia church basement. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

