

External Evaluation of Concord Floral

Inspired by *The Decameron*, a story of the young and privileged attempting to escape fourteenth century death and disease, *Concord Floral* links ancient plague to the decay of our modern humanity. Instead of a chateau, the kids of *Concord* take to an abandoned greenhouse—a place once filled with growing things, now inhabited only by the stunted emotions of suburban teens and their meaner impulses. The piece is a timely choice given our collective outrage at anyone who dares not to meet our expectations, of generations growing up in a world where our value is determined by likes and subs—but to produce it during an actual plague amps the stakes.

I haven't been shy about most online "theatre" made during the COVID-19 pandemic. I've hated it. Watching actors speak to their webcams in Brady Bunch view doesn't compare to electricity of actual theatre. And those that I've bothered to attend either bore me or were produced by organizations with massive budgets and are, for all intents, films. That's not the case with Saffron Henke's production of *Concord*. As much as anything asynchronous can be theatre, this piece is.

Where many producers of online theatre have given up on much of what makes a play into a production, *Concord* remembers that theatre is more than actors saying words. The direction has a concept, one that emerges from the text logically and satisfyingly, in a way that makes the audience feel as though Jordan Tannahill wrote it to be performed this way—and that, without changes to the script. Leaning into, rather than fighting, the constraints of online theatre, Saffron and her students create a real *production*. This isn't a film, though it was filmed; it is absolutely a play. Using straight up Zoom rooms, formal cinematic scenes, found footage, verité-style video, double-exposures, along with well-chosen lighting and music, the production immerses the audience into the devices of these kids. It helps that the play's central conflict involves a cellphone potentially lost in the guts of a dead girl—but using these devices as the confessionals into which these struggling teens pour their anxieties, lusts, confusion, and dread creates a tension not in the script, but without overshadowing the script. Watching the kids of *Concord* do and say, with complete conviction, the most horrible things, and record them onto these devices

for all of posterity makes the play scarier than it already is. It reminds us how much of ourselves, how many of our secrets, we've given to the technology we trust so mindlessly so often.

I've always said that, in theatre, constraints breed creativity. It's a lesson I wish more folks learned. When creators lean into the struggles rather than fight them, magic happens. That's what's happened in this piece. And that is such a valuable lesson for Saffron to have taught her students, because it underscores why a theatre education is valuable. It teaches students not to be cowed by obstacles, but to transcend them; it teaches them how to make the best from limited resources, rather than sitting and wishing more money and time were available. And while theatre programs so often have to justify their existence in a STEM-obsessed nation, experiences like *Concord Floral* are going to send students into the world with resilience and tenacity regardless of whether they make theatre their life or move into other fields. It's a perfect example why STEM should become STEAM—adding an A for arts.

There are no silver linings in a global health crisis, and I hate when people try to find them. That said, there are people who take the constraints placed on all of us during the shutdowns and use them to create lessons for students that, whether or not they even know it, will stick with them. This production of this play—a plague play produced in the middle of a plague—is one of them.

Ultimately, the script of *Concord Floral* shows its cards as mildly hopeless. But this production of a play examining hopelessness made me feel hope—because it reminded me that even under the bleakest of conditions, theatre can still happen and still create something like electricity. That was a pretty helpful lesson for me, too.

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