

Review: P@ndora

Held prisoner by online pornography and issues of self-image, Pandora looks for an escape route

BY KATHRYN GREENAWAY, THE GAZETTE MARCH 13, 2012



Zarrin Darnell-Martin gives a wonderful performance as Pandora, a teenager struggling to escape pornography's hold on her life.

Photograph by: Marie-France Coallier, THE GAZETTE

MONTREAL - The text is laced with metaphor, the staging highly stylized and the context surreal. Such a combination could have spelled disaster in less capable hands. But Tuesday's world premiere of P@ndora, a Youtheatre play about a teenage girl's troubling encounter with online pornography, was a unmitigated success.

There is one public performance at Théâtre Calixa Lavallée, on Thursday, before the company begins a 30-show tour of Montreal-

area high schools.

Playwright Sarah Berthiaume's writing is tight and relevant. She spent time with adolescent girls and boys before putting the final touches on the work, which she shaped with the help of fellow playwright Simon Boulerice. (The original French version was translated by Nadine Desrochers. The company can perform the play in either language.)

During the creative process,

P@dora director Michel Lefebvre watched nervously from a near distance. When it was time to put action to the words, Lefebvre's touch was meticulously spare.

"A straightforward look at porn would have been too much to handle," Lefebvre said following the English premiere, which played to a packed house of attentive

anglophone and francophone students.

"It's about a young girl judging herself, harshly," Lefebvre said. "I felt she was imprisoned in this vortex of porn."

To create a sense of heightened constraint, the wonderful Zarrin Darnell-Martin (as the girl, Pandora) performs the entire play atop a large metal box.

During Tuesday's performance, light filtered through the box's perforated lid. Its front was a screen, which occasionally lit up with hallucinatory images created by Frédéric St.-Hilaire.

Metal poles surrounded the box like so many guards corralling Pandora. (The play's terrific set design is by Max-Otto Fauteux, with striking lighting by Renaud Pettigrew and an ominous electro thrum by Guillaume Lévesque.)

Francis-William Rhéaume plays Pandora's crush, a blogger named Alex with a penchant for short stories that end badly. Recited throughout the play, the dark and distorted stories clung to the edges of Pandora's struggle with her self-image and her horror and fascination with online porn. She had just wanted to take a peek. Things got out of hand.

The play's title is a direct reference to the Greek myth about the young woman who receives the gift of a box that, unbeknownst to her, holds all the evils of the world. She is forbidden to open it, but succumbs to her curiosity, lifts the lid and unleashes unspeakable horrors.

Rhéaume also takes on the role of a shadowy "search-engine" figure, with distorted voice and red fox mask, who nudges Pandora farther and farther into her online nightmare.

As she struggles to escape his hold on her, her shame manifests itself as a seeping, oily stain on body and soul.

Both Darnell-Martin and Rhéaume gave strong performances that engaged the young crowd completely.

"Pornography is pervasive in our society. It's easily accessible on our smart phones," Lefebvre said. "And these kids are at an age where they have questions about sexuality and how it's supposed to work. I wanted this play to start a discussion."

Youtheatre presents P@ndora Thursday at 7 p.m. at Théâtre Calixa Lavallée, 3819 Calixa Lavallée Ave. Tickets cost \$15 for adults and \$10 for students. For reservations, call 514-844-8781. For more information, visit youtheatre.ca.

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