



photo credit: Robert Desroches

A PANDORA'S BOX THAT SHOULD BE OPENED AND EXPLORED

December 3, 2015

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We often forget nowadays that just like our world, the virtual realm is very real, because we pour so much of our lives into it - so much so that it practically makes our real-world decisions for us.

In response to this growing influence of online media, playwright Sarah Berthiaume focuses her piece *P@ndora* on the controversy surrounding cyber-pornography, through the lens of a female high school student named **Pandora** (Bria McLaughlin). One day, when the polysemous character **Firefox** (Sean Colby) slides a lighter with the website *foxylady.com* imprinted on it under **Pandora's** washroom stall, she succumbs to her inner curiosity and visits the site. There, she discovers imagery both disturbing and enticing at the same time, further aggravating her struggles with her already low self-esteem and perplexing her relationship with her crush **Alex**(Sean Colby) as a result.

Berthiaume's script is remarkable in raising many important issues in our attitudes towards cyberspace through its open-

ended nature and allegorical features. I always say that expression over exposition is the way to go in a visual medium, and *P@ndora* as a whole effortlessly delivers on that front. Whether or not **Pandora's** initial interaction with **Firefox** actually happens or is just a figment of her imagination is left for us to decide, but the point is that this piece showcases the degree to which we associate the images we see online to our own lives. In many ways, our culture bombards us with images and literature around sex and so our sexuality is largely informed by behavioural and aesthetical expectations established by the media. In *P@ndora*, these notions are evident through **Firefox's** stereotyping of gender roles in sexual relations and, especially, sexual politics.

I like that **Alex's** hobby of blogging is a driving force in this narrative. Unbeknownst to him, his recited fictional stories metaphorically describe **Pandora's** situation as it unfolds as well as foreshadowing her fate. As a blogger myself, I find this an inspiring plot device.

McLaughlin skillfully portrays the multiple dimensions of sixteen-year-old **Pandora's** personality. On the one hand, she is audacious and sure of everything, but on the other, she is vulnerable due to her inability to determine where she stands in her dominance, or lack thereof, over media influence. She believes that her shame comes from her obsession with wanting to become as beautiful as the porn stars she watches, but her real shame actually derives from her negligence to talk to someone about it.

Colby is able to oscillate between his roles of **Alex** and **Firefox** with complete ease. **Alex** is a nerdy, though greatly emotional boy, who genuinely cares for **Pandora's** well being. However, he soon realizes that **Pandora** has inner demons that she needs to overcome, so he doesn't allow himself to become too attached to her. **Firefox**, on the other hand, is a manipulative, pimp-like figure that feeds on **Pandora's** conscience, trying to tell her what to do and how to act according to how women are commercialized – even if it may not be suitable for her.

Prior to seeing the performance, I had anticipated that it would rely heavily on digital media in order to effectively tell this story and immerse the audience in the interactions between the characters and the Internet. To my pleasant surprise, the use of technology is minimal, so as not to distract from the vocal and bodily expressiveness of the performers.

The set consists of a single, large glass box placed centre stage that serves as a constant reminder of **Pandora's** consequences for her actions, as every decision and encounter she makes take place atop or near the box. I'm glad that the creative team went with this sort of simple yet versatile form of symbolism. Frequently heard evocative sounds composed by Thierry Gauthier and designed by Guillaume Lévesque dovetail flawlessly with Martin Sirois' unique geometrical lighting design. Every heartbeat and every tense moment is felt with each resonance and is complemented by precise shaping of light that illuminates the actors' bodies.

This is a performance that every individual who has ever been hesitant to openly discuss pornography should see. It teaches us that although we will always expose ourselves to potentially explicit images, whether we intend to or not, it is our choices in how we internalize such imagery that will shape our discourse and overall lifestyle.

Presented by Youtheatre and directed by Michel Lefebvre, P@ndora is playing at Young People's Theatre until Dec. 11. For more information visit: youngpeoplestheatre.ca