

New musical ‘Breathe’ a powerful time capsule of the pandemic

BY ALEC KERR
THE CONWAY DAILY SUN

“Breathe,” a new musical conceived during and about the COVID-19 pandemic by New York Times best-selling novelist Jodi Picoult and playwright Timothy Allen McDonald, is available virtually on M&D at the Eastern Slope Inn Playhouse’s website.



“Breathe,” a new musical conceived and written by New York Times best-selling novelist Jodi Picoult and playwright Timothy Allen McDonald, looks at COVID-19 pandemic. (COURTESY PHOTO)

expectation of “Fever,” are all set in New York from March to May 2020 and address the realities of life during COVID, including relationship strains during quarantining (“Aches”), parenting (“Swelling and Irritation”) and the Black Lives Matter protests (“Fatigue”).

The individual chapters work as mini-musicals that are loosely connected by references to characters from the previous chapters. All the characters come together in an epilogue that imagines life after the pandemic, a world we are just now getting a glimpse of. Each chapter is about 20 minutes long. With the 10-minute epilogue, the musical clocks in at about one hour and 50 minutes.

Each chapter has a different director and was written by a different set of composers who also helped Picoult and McDonald with writing the script. This helps to keep the musical vital with a variety of distinct voices and perspectives.

Rob Rokicki and Rebecca Murillo wrote the music for “Fever” with direction by Emily Maltby; Daniel Mertzluft and Kate Leonard wrote “Aches” with direction by Joe Barros; Doug Besterman and Sharon Vaughn wrote “Swelling and Irritation” with direction by Lorin Latarro; Douglas Lyons and Ethan Pakchar wrote “Fatigue” with direction by Zhailon Levingston; and Marcy Heisler and Zina Goldrich wrote “Shortness of Breath” with direction by Jeff Calhoun.

As it is a staged reading, there is no set, but hand-drawn storyboards are used to help set the scene and move action forward when needed. In addition, there are times when words on a page appear. These additions help to make the presentation more dynamic than a typical reading. The chapters range from relatable and humorous to heartbreaking, often within the same scene. “Fever” starts off with Allison (Denée Benton) waking up hungover in the bed of a stranger after a wedding in Mexico City. This leads to the amusing song “What’d You Do This Time?” The stranger, Jerry (Rubén J. Carbajal), is a “Titanic”-loving gentleman. When Allison turns out to have COVID, Jerry takes care of her. It is a sweet little romance driven by Benton and Carbajal’s believable chemistry.

“Aches” centers on another couple who are having two different responses to quarantine. Theo (Max Clayton) is debating breaking up with his boyfriend Max (Matt Doyle), while Max is convinced Theo is about to propose. Over the course of the scene, Theo begins to see why he fell in love with Max in the first place this is chronicled on the heartwarming and funny songs “Not Finished Yet” and “Clear As Day.”

“Swelling and Irritation” shows parents Kate (Patti Murin) and Adam (Colin Donnell) struggling with how to deal with three young kids without the aid of a nanny while also trying to work at home. This chapter has some of the show’s best and biggest laughs and the insanely catchy “Supermom.” In a short amount of time, Murin and Donnell are able to convey a complete story arc of exhausted parents struggling to communicate who learn to become a united team.

“Fatigue” is the most powerful piece as it focuses on Devon (Daniel Yearwood), a young Black man arrested at a Black Lives Matter protest by a white cop (Josh Davis) who treats him terribly. It turns out Devon’s father (T. Oliver Reid) is a police officer working in the same precinct. This leads to some hard conversions between father and son and colleagues. “Together We Can” is an empowering anthem calling for change and unity.

“Shortness of Breath” is set during the virtual funeral of Charles (Brian Stokes Mitchell), the cheating husband of Vivian (Kelli O’Hara). Charles’ ghost is haunting Vivian trying to remind her of the good times they shared. There’s a twist in this segment that is unexpected and heart wrenching.

The collective experience of all the chapters acts as an emotional honest and relatable time capsule of COVID19 pandemic. Throughout the musical there is a resounding sense of hope. There’s a certain catharsis in watching these scenes unfold and realizing that, while we were all isolated, we all had a shared experience.

Tickets are available at mdplayhouse.com through July 2. Each ticket allows you to watch on-demand up to three times within 48 hours after your first viewing. A portion of the \$25 ticket price goes back to M&D.

The musical was filmed as a staged reading in March 2021 at the 92 Street Y’s Kaufmann Concert Hall in New York City without an audience, in compliance with all New York State safety regulations. For many involved, it was their return to the stage and in-person performance following the Broadway shut down on March 12, 2020.

“Breathe” is broken up into five chapters, each named after a different COVID symptom: “Fever,” “Aches,” “Swelling and Irritation,” “Fatigue” and “Shortness of Breath.” These scenes, with the

expectation of “Fever,” are all set in New York from March to May 2020 and address the realities of life during COVID, including relationship strains during quarantining (“Aches”), parenting (“Swelling and Irritation”) and the Black Lives Matter protests (“Fatigue”).

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