

Review: Lab Theater fights "The Plague" in innovative adaptation of Camus novel

By CHRIS SILK

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FORT MYERS — Something is causing the rats in Oran to die in droves. They die in the streets, the houses and the hotels. The rats carry bubonic plague. Death rides the wind. Oran is a city under siege. The Lab Theater dives into the world premiere of Albert Camus novel "The Plague."

Fort Myers resident Louise Wigglesworth, the Lab Theater's playwright-in-residence, adapted the 90-minute show from the original French with the permission of the Camus estate. She spent more than a year working on the project, paring a five-part, 300-page novel into a 90-minute play.

The novel (titled "La Peste" in French) follows a group of medical workers and others as they battle a devastating disease in the Algerian city. Camus wanted to show how such a horrible event - when hundreds of people could die in a single day - would affect the populace. The absurdist novel, rendered in stark, bleak prose, can also be read as an allegory for the Nazi occupation of France during World War II.

Wigglesworth takes a scalpel to the work, excising perhaps the most compelling theme - humanity's faith in the face of helpless, overwhelming odds. She crafts a whirlwind series of lickety-split vignettes that race through the novel's high points. Steve Chase's Doctor Rieux moves firmly to the center; the show becomes now a struggle between the doctor's courage and the plague's ability to destroy even the strongest faith.

While I understand that a word-for-word adaptation isn't possible, what emerges still feels incomplete. In carving out one central plot amongst the many that Camus swirled into his dusty desert mix, the play loses some of its impact.

By moving the faith angle to the front, the production shifts focus off themes like solidarity, exile and separation. Even though the characters that voice these positions all appear in Wigglesworth's adaptation, their stories lack the depth and weight that might come from more stage time or an entirely different approach to the show.

Unless audiences have read the novel, it is difficult to identify with Stephen Hooper's forlorn administrator Grand or Dale Hoover's trapped journalist Rambert, much less understand why they're even part of the story. Even Robin Murray's Tarrou, the ethical heart of "The Plague," feels sidelined.

The production does succeed in making a difficult, existentialist novel comprehensible and certainly watchable. Wigglesworth and director Annette Trossbach cut much of the slow-moving sense of dread, substituting staccato radio broadcasts (presented by a lively Chris Cooper). I loved this device - it added a powerful realism and immediacy - and wish it had appeared more often. The show also proves gasp-worthy and astonishingly powerful in spots - especially when it slams audiences in the face with just how terrifying plague can be.

Passing judgement on a project's maiden outing can be an interesting proposition. The Lab Theater champions stripped-down, no-budget, no-frills experimental theater produced with amateur actors. For "The Plague," the atmosphere works - to a degree.

Trossbach keeps much of the cast on stage for the entire night. Two risers at stage left and stage right flank an upstage platform at stage center that serves as cafe table, examination bed or surgeon's office. Cast members wear black; the stage comes draped in white. Just a few pops of color appear - a blood-red tie or a jaunty rose stuck in a hat.

Except for Chase's Doctor Rieux, the cast plays multiple roles, leaping off the steps to become gossiping townspeople, arguing doctors or chattering cafe patrons. What Trossbach does exceptionally well is give life to the truly shattering moments in the production - the ones that burn into the collective memory of a population (or an audience) and allow people to feel the cruel wrath of an unfeeling disease.

A flamenco dance, complete with clacking castanets, stops abruptly when a dancer falls out of step, crying, screaming and clutching her side. Stricken moans and belabored wails greet the agonizing death of the plague's first patient. Chase's Rieux stumbles and grimaces under the weight of his task.

Magistrate Othon's young child (Spencer Barney) shrieks with a howl of lamentation as he succumbs. His prolonged death offers a ray of hope; the good doctor Castel's experimental serum may save the city. For me, this moment hit hardest; listening to a young child scream in pain, even on stage, was sheer agony that forced me to cringe in my seat and turn away from the scene.

The most beautiful moments of the night come from David Yudowitz. He takes up the mantle of Oran's spiritual leader, Father Paneloux. In a thrilling, spirited sermon delivered to a congregation rocking, praying and humming in the improvised "pews," he compares the plague to the "flail of god," as it will separate the grain from the straw. A second sermon reveals how Father Paneloux loses his faith - and the consequences of that.

Chase, on stage for much of the evening, makes an appealing cipher around which to build the story. In the novel; Rieux serves as narrator, but Camus hides this fact from readers until the final pages. Here, Chase's voice booms out at times, recounting events, setting the scene for the dread to come.

The actor allows the audience to see his slow physical and mental deterioration over

the course of the evening. The pain of loss grows on his face and in his brow and comes to inhabit his shoulders. His stare becomes more blank as he talks to people, barely looking up from X-rays and paperwork or crying in anguish at being unable to save another young victim.

J. Mitchell Haley's sound design adds to the bare-bones atmosphere. Train whistles blow, ambulance sirens whir, the crackle of fire roars and the city gates clang shut with an ominous boom as Oran turns its back on the world. Some cast members carry musical instruments (guitars, drums, other percussion) on stage, giving a soft undertone to scenes.

"The Plague" creates a harrowing sense of doom on the Lab Theater's stage. Wigglesworth's fast-paced adaptation condenses the novel into one man's struggle with his faith and allows the audience to experience his battle with a terrible enemy. Watch for Steve Chase's wonderful expressions and David Yudowitz's thundering sermons.

I didn't catch the plague. Never even had the chicken pox. Email me, csilk@naplesnews.com, find me on Twitter at [@napleschris](https://twitter.com/napleschris) or read my [Stage Door theater blog](#). You can also sign up to [receive the Stage Door blog via email](#).

