



Play 'The Plague' in Fort Myers stares at death

Rats are dying in the streets. And the people of Oran will soon follow.

Albert Camus' "The Plague" is far from an upbeat novel. The same can be said for Lab Theater's ambitious new adaptation of the 1947 classic. Director Annette Trossbach and playwright Louise Wigglesworth create a suffocating, eerie mood that rarely lets up for 90 minutes.

The existential drama is miles away from the lighthearted, toe-tapping fare usually found in Southwest Florida theaters.

In fact, this adaptation can be downright horrifying, especially when you see a young boy writhing and crying out in bubonic agony for what seems like an eternity on a doctor's operating table. It's equally agonizing to watch – and yet you can't turn away.

With the permission of the Camus estate, Wigglesworth adapted the 300-page novel into an easy-to-digest, relatively fast-paced 90 minutes. The result is an unsettling but ultimately uplifting look at what happens when a city is forced to stare death in the face. We fight, we scream, but eventually we find the courage and basic human decency to persevere.

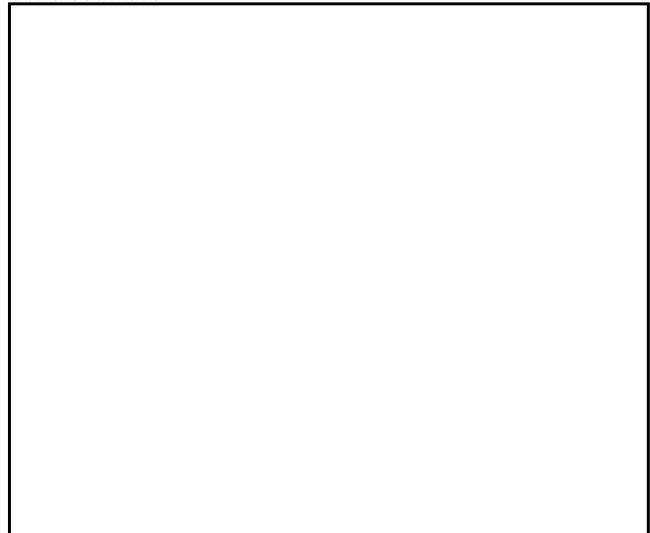
Purists will likely object to the Cliff's Notes running time – multitudes of scenes, themes and characters got chopped or reduced to minimal roles – but the story still manages to be both profound and entertaining. And if you don't have time to read the dense novel – I recently tried and failed – this might be the next best thing.

The play's debut, however, could have been better served by a stronger cast. Some of the community-theater actors aren't up to the task, and that results in ineffective scenes or – worse – unintentionally funny or too-broad acting.

Still, Trossbach took great care in casting the central character of Dr. Rieux, the level-headed town doctor who champions reason and decency amongst all the death and panic in this Algerian town. Steve Chase plays Rieux with a grim, no-nonsense manner and a deep courage: He knows what he needs to do, and he'll do it even as the town falls apart around him.

The other 14 actors play multiple parts

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and also serve as a sort of Greek chorus, providing sound effects or parroting other actors' words in a spooky hiss. Dressed in black against a stark white backdrop, the actors sit on risers and pop up as needed. Or suddenly everyone bursts into movement — an entire bustling town comes to life in a matter of seconds, dancing and playing guitars, gossiping and worrying, grieving and dying.

Hundreds of lighting and sound effects add to the mood, courtesy of sound designer Mitch Haley and lighting and sound director Roger Tanksley. Blackouts chop the show into a series of short vignettes, and a low heartbeat — slow and barely audible — offers a constant reminder of the fragility of human existence. We're all just one heartbeat away from death.

"The Plague" has other problems besides the spotty acting. The second act feels rushed and unsatisfying, for example, with several supporting characters either getting abruptly dismissed or having a sudden importance that wasn't quite earned in act one.

Still, it's often worth slogging through those problems to experience something new and ambitious on the Southwest Florida stage. It's an engrossing and emotional effort by Wigglesworth and Lab Theater, and I hope they continue tinkering with the show and fine-tuning it in the future.

With the right actors and more work, it could become something truly special.

If You Go

- **What:** "The Plague"
- **When:** Now through May 26. Show times are 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday.
- **Where:** The Laboratory Theater of Florida in Kiwanis Hall, 1634 Woodford Ave., downtown Fort Myers.
- **Tickets:** \$12-\$20

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