

How to Defend Yourself

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In this paper, I will be analyzing *How to Defend Yourself*. This play was presented as part of the 2019 Humana New Play Festival at Actors Theatre of Louisville. This year's festival ran from March 22nd-24th. Written by Lily Padilla in 2018 and has since been workshopped through various organizations. This play, and the Humana Play Festival as a whole, has been my highest rated collegiate experience so far. When I say that this play made me speechless, at the end I truly could not stand up for fear of falling over the edge. I left the theatre having heard a story about people my age and their response to events that happen in real life. *How to Defend Yourself* centers around a self-defense class created in response to a brutal rape of a fellow sorority member. The class is made of current members, pledges, outsiders, and members of a fraternity whose members performed the terrible act. The characters tackle their own responses to the events that have happened. With themes of sexual consent and physical contact, this play had the audience laughing one moment and hurting the next.

We entered the theatre and we were greeted by a gymnasium, similar to that of Middle Tennessee State University's Rec Center. One element I was excited by was that this show was done in the round. It had elements such as a dry-erase board, sound system, punching bag, bleachers, weight rack, and landing pads that were moved in and out of scenes as necessary. The floor also had designs painted, similar to sections of a basketball court. The actors would gravitate towards certain sections at particular times which seemed indicative of the mood of the scene. Being a very naturalistic play, this setting helped put us in a gymnasium and suck us into the story being told. The costumes were indicative of present day, comprised mostly of activewear and the occasional swimsuit. The sound and lighting was also very natural, save for a

few moments. These few moments were very strong. There was a moment when Brandi, the leader of the self-defense class, has an anxiety attack and starts remembering her own trauma. The lighting shifted from the natural florescent look for the gymnasium to a dark special to suggest that she was then transported to her own world. All of the design elements were well thought out and executed. Especially the final moments where we travel backwards through time to see the various parties and get-togethers we experience. This includes college ragers, proms, and birthday parties. Through this series, we have a complementary series of lights and sounds, all topped by a huge release fifty or so balloons from the grid above. This moment had me in tears. It was a very moving ending to a very moving show.

On to the direction. This play is about a sorority member who is raped by two members of a fraternity. In response to this event, two sorority members host a self-defense course. They talk about things such as personal comfort zones, consent, and how to defend yourself against anyone who disrespects your personal boundaries. Along with these themes, the play touches on if it is okay to *want* sexual encounters that are not explicitly consensual (i.e. spontaneous rough sex). I feel the director handled these themes with grace and thoughtfulness. The script (and therefore the director) deals with the idea of how to respond to events such as these. How does our upbringing affect our views on tragedies like this? How do we respond? The one white male character makes a remark during the defense class that another character is “learning to defend [herself] against people who look like [him].” This statement is a powerful one. In a time where straight white males are the dominant group performing atrocities, they are the dominant group being alienated and lumped together. How does a member of this group react?

In a similar vein, we see three women of color and their responses, not only to being marginalized through their lives, but also how they have been objectified, especially in their college years. The beautiful part of this production is that it utilizes the round structure so well. When the characters pair off into partners, each pair takes a corner of the stage. The audience members in that corner hear that particular set of dialogue. Which means that there are conversations that happen throughout the play and ideas shared by certain characters that I did not hear. I feel the director did this intentionally, to remind us that we do not always get one-hundred percent of the details in any case. This was a very effective storytelling device. Though my favorite moment of the play has already been stated, I feel it is equally as important in this section of my writing. The balloon drop at the end. With the simple stage direction of “there are balloons” in the script, the director and designers brought an emotional climax to an invigorating show and brought most of the audience to tears. This proves the power of brilliant minds and big budgets.

On to my favorite part about this show. The acting of it. Each character is their own main character. The script is well written and balanced with meaty characters that any actor would be happy to play. I was privileged to hear four of the actors talk about the process of dealing with the severity of the script. How they would come to rehearsals and know that they could step out of the room if necessary and that they were in a brave space. They shared a poem with the audience about what a brave space means and how to create one. The talk was wonderful, but pales in comparison to their performances.

Each character seemed two dimensional at the top of the show, very flat and stereotypical. But as the show progressed, the character gained depth and believability. A large

part of this is due to the actors' ability to develop the characters and analyze their actions. I would like to talk about the character of Eggo. Eggo is the friend of Andy and fellow fraternity member. The description of Eggo is "person of color. Wants to be loved, by anyone." The actor who played this character did a wonderful job of portraying both sides. When we are first introduced to Eggo, he is silently following his friend Andy to this self defense class. He says very little and sits on the bleaches. Slowly we learn more about his preferences. When they workshop personal boundaries, he asks the girl he is paired with to lick his arm. The actor requests this with such conviction and honesty that it opens a whole new can of questions about who this character is.

The actor's physical abilities added to the character as well. There was a short scene where Eggo was alone in the gymnasium. He decides to use this time to practice some dance moves. This larger actor performed very athletic and modern dance moves, many of which might be found at a drag show. This was so out of character from the silent and stalwart man that we met at the beginning. And in the end we see a complete character shift, with him stepping forward to offer to defend a fellow classmate who has been sexually attacked. Eggo has tremendous depth and the actor who played him did a spectacular job.

All in all, I would like to say that this was one of the most invigorating productions I have seen in a long time. That singular show may have been worth the two-hundred dollars it cost to go on this trip. The director, actors, and designers handled this story with such dignity and respect that I have only found in challenging American Theatre. It was so well written and had such a timely message which had a tremendous impact on not only myself but also on any other

twenty-something year old in the building. *How to Defend Yourself* asks important questions about how we respond to crisis, what makes us think the way we do, and what would you do?