



The Book of Magdalene

The Book of Magdalene
Written by Caridad Svich
Directed by Amelia Rico
Main Street Theater
<https://mainstreettheater.com/> (<https://mainstreettheater.com/>)
Streaming online through Feb. 28

“Remind me again.”

“About what.”

“About it they say it feels like.”

“Skin against skin.”

In the opening scene of *The Book of Magdalene*, the exquisite new play written for streaming by **Caridad Svich** and presented by Main Street Theater (<https://mainstreettheater.com/>), two characters recall what it was like before the “weird” time. A catastrophic event has created a new world – one where characters don’t touch, people don’t leave their homes out of fear of what is outside, trillionaires flourish while the masses barely survive, and most of the “elders” are dead. Sound familiar?

Len, the titular “Magdalene,” exists in this world but just barely. Living in the edge-lands, she hangs out with her girlfriend, Ru, takes care of her Elder (relationship unspecified and unimportant), and works for what can best be described as a phone sex line for lonely people—most of her clients crave companionship and she only occasionally provides more. She is played by Jennifer Wang, whose beautifully luminescent performance is the anchor of this dreamy, poetic play. Len is guarded, stoic, and disconnected from those around her – what you might expect when a person who still has a lifetime to live sees nothing but a bleak road ahead.

Like the biblical Mary Magdalene, she straddles two worlds. According to the Gospels, Mary Magdalene is present for Jesus’s crucifixion and is the first person to witness the resurrection. It’s worth noting that the play reminds us that references of Mary Magdalene being a prostitute began with the sermons of Pope Gregory I; the canonical gospel only refers to her as an apostle/follower of Christ. (Ah, the patriarchy.) Similarly, Len has also witnessed a “before and after” – and has internalized the personal and societal trauma brought on by the weird times much in the way many of us have COVID.

When Ru (a radiant Mariam Albishah) announces a move due to work, presumably to a better situation, Len dares not dream of going with her. She has to take care of Elder (delightfully played by Maria Schenck), whose health she fears is on the decline, and she is too paralyzed by hopelessness to even let herself imagine a better place.

Svich’s script expertly balances the darkness with bits of humor—adding a delightful touch of magical realism in one scene to leverage against the somber themes. The language of the characters is clipped and short – complementing the stark ecosystem that these characters inhabit. This is a life without decoration, without embellishments—no adjectives are needed. Len exists, works, and survives another day but takes no joy in the interactions.

Delicately directed by Amelia Rico, the production features design that cleverly hints at the dystopian society without going full-out Mad Max. The sets by Afsaneh Aayani are spartan and effective and the costume design by Victoria Nicolette Gist is positively ingenious, featuring garments that are both familiar and odd. Both the lighting (by Grey Starbird) and the sound (by Janel Badrina) compliment the video format and provide nuance in the moodier scenes .

The Book of Magdalene has been written and staged for our times. The actors are socially distanced, occasionally wear masks, and even the romantic couple are divided onstage by a plexiglass screen. These touches serve the play nicely: they add a theatricality to the scenes that reinforce the feeling of isolation and serve to enhance the themes of the play: how do we survive trauma, how do we forge emotional connections in such conditions, and why do we create and make art?

As Len begins to take her own journey towards light—and perhaps a new life, the audience cannot help but see itself in her. Will she be able to move forward after these events? Will we?



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