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Houston's Main Street Theater attracting national attention with 'Magdalene'

Both the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal praised the digital production.

Chris Gray | February 24, 2021 Updated: February 25, 2021, 9:26 am



Jennifer Wang as Len and Mariam Albishah as Reveler in 'The Book of Magdalene' at Main Street Theater

Photo: Courtesy Main Street Theater

An impeccably timed dystopian drama is earning national attention for Houston's Main Street Theater.

Last week, while Texas shivered, MST's virtual premiere of Caridad Svitch's "The Book of Magdalene" received favorable notices in **the New York Times** and **the Wall Street Journal**. Due to the weather-related disruption – and the recognition – the play has been extended through Feb. 28.

"I'm just pleased that not only did we get national attention, but that they liked it," says founding artistic director, Rebecca Greene Udden. "(The reviewers) could have not liked it. That's always a possibility when you get a high-profile review, but we were pretty excited about it. We felt confident, but you never know."

Noting the fluidity of "Magdalene," the Times' Laura Collins-Hughes praised the way it "triggers sense memories of watching fresh work up close in small spaces, where the ingenuity of unfamiliar artists can surprise you."

"Even if you don't care for magical realism on or off stage, you should consider giving this one a shot," offered Terry Teachout of the Journal.

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Directed by Amelia Rico, "Magdalene" is a noirish riff on the biblical prostitute cum Jesus confidante's story, less post-apocalyptic than pre-apocalyptic. It follows Len (Jennifer Wang), who scratches out a living at a monotonous call center, entertaining customer confessionals until one chilling encounter sends her screaming into the void. Pandemic markers are plentiful: masks, plexiglass screens, the absence of choirs. Social distancing has metastasized into profound alienation; people are no longer permitted to touch one another.

“Magdalene” feels eerily familiar, but its atmosphere of oppressive isolation is even more pronounced than the present day.

“The play does take place several generations from this moment,” Udden notes, “but you do get the sense that whatever happened now really made a catastrophic change in the way people were able to live.”

If anything, the bleakness of “Magdalene” is all the more recognizable after the events of last week. Those in power have long since pretended to care about peons like Len and Elder (Maria Schenk), her mother, an unsettling reflection of the way certain officials in Texas all but abdicated their responsibilities in the wake of the storm’s catastrophic effects. The institutions of “Magdalene” likewise seem to have long since disappeared, despite a cryptic priest (Andrea Boronell) offering a few strategic tugs on Len’s conscience.

“They have buses that may or may not come,” notes Udden. “You get the sense that everybody’s on their own, and I’m sure that people in Texas really felt that (last) week: we’re on our own, nobody’s helping us.”

MST premiered Svitch’s English-language adaptation of Isabel Allende’s “The House of the Spirits” in 2009, and Udden kept in touch with the OBIE-winning playwright. With “Magdalene,” she says, “she sent me this one over the summer, and it just seemed so timely; and also, it seemed like something that would work really well in a filmed format.”

The austere set design, by Afsaneh Aayani, lends a proper touch of surrealism to Svitch’s verselike rhythms. (Both the Times and the Journal were rightly taken by a rather large cicada puppet’s scene-stealing walk-on.) Rico’s alternating between close-ups and wider shots, coupled with Grey Starbird’s haunting lighting design, help foreground Len’s inner turmoil.

“I’m not a big fan of just creating things to throw up to stream, but some things really work online,” says Udden. “I thought this would be really a good play for us to put on in this time, in this way.”

To ease patrons’ safety concerns, MST plans to continue presenting its digital productions once it resumes in-house performances with limited audiences, which

Udden says could happen as soon as late July or early August. Its Theater for Youth program hopes to do a show at MATCH in June. As eager as she is to resume regular live theater, Udden is also grateful for the way “Magdalene” has expanded her company’s tool kit.

“You can’t make money on these digital things,” she says. “You have to know that you’re just doing this to keep your name out there and keep the connection with your audience. It’s an uphill battle, but it has given us some skills that we didn’t have before, and new ways of reaching people.”

Chris Gray is a Galveston-based writer.



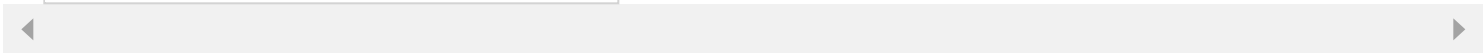
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