Review: What it’s like to process the pandemic with a group of strangers at On the Boards

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“A Thousand Ways: An Assembly” at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. The show runs at On the Boards through March 12. (Liza Voll)

By

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“A Thousand Ways (Part Three): An Assembly” is a culmination. The “A Thousand Ways” triptych from New York-based theater duo 600 Highwaymen (Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone) has centered connection between strangers throughout its first two installments: first through a phone call, and then by placing two people on opposite sides of a plexiglass pane. Those previous one-on-one experiences have grown here to encompass a group, a
final gathering of strangers in the “A Thousand Ways” journey. But “An Assembly” is also an opportunity to truly take a step back and begin to process the turmoil everyone has been through, and the accumulating feelings that have built, over the past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“An Assembly,” running at On the Boards, features a group of no more than 16 chairs on an otherwise mostly empty stage, save a small wooden platform with an “X” on it and a large stack of notecards. Those who file into the space take their seats on the stage and become both audience and performer, creating a wholly unique theatrical experience depending on who is in the room. Those unfamiliar with “Part One: A Phone Call” and “Part Two: An Encounter” shouldn’t worry — most of the attendees in my group (myself included) had seen only one or none of the previous installations.

Thankfully, each notecard features a set of instructions — from simple gestures, to questions to ask aloud, to prompts to move or breathe or make eye contact. With each completed task, the notecard is lightly dropped to the ground. The stack of cards also routinely prompt the reader to pass the stack to another audience member, ensuring no one has to endure the proverbial spotlight for too terribly long. It’s honestly stunning how quickly people, even the clearly reluctant ones, give themselves over to the asks on the cards. It results in an almost surreal blending of performance and reality when you can’t tell if someone reading from the cards cleared their throat from nerves or because a notecard from an unseen creator prompted them to do so.

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Periodically, the experience dips into an almost guided meditation, asking you to close your eyes and imagine a backyard barbecue with your fellow audience members. At first it’s picturing a group of strangers. But as the experience progresses, you may learn who in the group has the best singing voice or the newest shoes or you may have passed around an object from someone’s pocket that no one can quite decipher or understand. And with each small piece of information, each dive back into the backyard space becomes more grounded, more colorful as the prodding of “An Assembly” adds dimensions to those who were previously strangers.

The exercise is a gentle metaphor that 600 Highwaymen use to help talk about the looming cloud of the pandemic. Even as mask mandates around the state prepare to lift, many still feel a tinge of worry about being around strangers. Though this experience is masked, 600 Highwaymen don’t shy away from that fear, and instead embrace it and open the door to feeling like this group of people understands that lingering fear, you’re not alone, you’re experiencing it together and it’s all right.

By the end of the night, all of the cards lay scattered around the stage like individual reminders of each passing moment and memory created during the experience. Someone in my group joked that we should create a group chat. Of course that’s silly, we only just met an hour ago. But in that impulse is a rather profound truth: somehow I felt like I actually knew everyone in that group. Maybe not by name, since not everyone was prompted by the cards to divulge that information, but I still knew them.

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It feels like it should be a false sense of connection. After all, people can, and often do, lie in uncomfortable situations. And one segment of the experience even encourages making some assumptions about people: put your hand on the shoulder of who you think is the best dancer or who likes to be alone. But even the act of hands hitting my shoulder when prompted to touch someone who gives good advice was moving. And another segment, imagining what someone’s parents may look like, even if there’s no way to know whether you’re right or wrong, provides mysteriously profound connection just through the act of taking the time to think deeply about a stranger. “An Assembly” gives unparalleled space to consider other human beings in a typically unyieldingly fast-paced world.

While “An Assembly” has a two-week run (ending March 12) at On the Boards, for one weekend only later this month, March 24-27, Seattle artist Timothy White Eagle and his collaborators The Violet Triangle will be presenting “Revival,” another limited-space immersive experience. Rooted in ritual theater, “Revival” centers the story of a hero being swallowed alive and then returned, an experience the audience members will themselves undergo on the Merrill Theater stage. With this performance and installation work and the work of 600 Highwaymen, On the Boards is offering a much needed reminder of what it means to really experience others after such a long period defined by distance and separation.

At On the Boards
“A Thousand Ways (Part Three): An Assembly”

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