

## THEATRE REVIEWS

*I Forgive You*, written by Scott Jones and Robert Chafe; directed by Jillian Keiley. Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland, St. John's Arts and Culture Centre, August 25, 2022.

“You will choose love over fear.”

The stage lights are on and the curtain is open as the audience enters for the opening night of Scott Jones and Robert Chafe's *I Forgive You*. The audience is expecting a show that tells the story of a violent homophobic attack against Jones, his resultant spinal cord injury and paraplegia, and his subsequent forgiveness of the attacker. They may not, however, be expecting an in-depth meditation on the power of music, forgiveness, anger, love, and storytelling.

The set is simple: there is an undulating semi-circle of what appear at first glance to be light wooden chairs on risers. Upon closer inspection, the vertebrae-shaped backs of the chairs are detached from their seats, perhaps representing Jones's injury. The spine-like structure rises and falls with the curvature of the risers, marking out and containing the performance space. There are two pianos on either side of the structure. A soft blue light from overhead illuminates the stage space, which is otherwise surrounded in black curtains. There is an empty music stand in the centre, waiting for its conductor.

The space is silent when the conductor (Jones as himself), Character #1 (Ho Ka Kei, Jeff Ho), and Character #2 (Nathan Carroll) enter. The two characters stand on each side of the set, and Jones takes

his place at the waiting music stand, back on to the audience. This placement aligns Jones with the audience; he is at once in control of the action onstage and is watching it unfold. This staging also places Jones, a wheelchair user, back-on to the audience. His face is thus hidden for much of the play, physically centring the work around his wheelchair and the site of his injury. The three men are wearing what is later revealed to be the clothing Jones was wearing at the time of his attack: jeans, white t-shirts, and light-coloured plaid shirts. The work begins with a monologue from Character #2 discussing the legal processes involved for a victim of an attempted murder. As Character #2 speaks, the chorus (a group of 18 young artists) enters the space and takes their seats on the stools, wearing beige pants, white button-up shirts, and light blue neckties or hair ties. When Character #2 starts to read his victim impact statement, the choir begins to sing.

The two characters and the chorus are embodiments of Jones's words and emotions as he tells his story; they are representations of his forgiveness, anger, pain, and joy. The artists surround Jones with his memories as they express his words through music, dance, or dialogue. The characters reference Jones's and Chafe's creative experiences when writing the play — how they decided that it would be Jones's words, arranged verbatim from conversations with Chafe. The characters pass the dialogue back and forth, correcting each other, speaking directly to Jones, and interacting with the chorus. The musical accompaniment is also passed between the characters and the chorus; they literally hand over the piano as one picks up on the note where the other left off, crossing hands as they sit next to each other for a moment on the bench. The characters flow freely into representations of other important figures in Jones's story: his mother, a Spanish lover, and his attacker, Shane.

The fluidity of character, speech, and music in the work reflects the nature of telling a story from memory. The characters amend each others' versions of events, creating humorous exchanges as they try to work out what really happened. They try to decide, for example, if the courtroom really "gaspd" when Jones forgave Shane. Jones's memories pop up organically from the topics discussed; his experiences are not

expressed chronologically but are instead connected to each other in the way a healing mind may make connections between events. Memories of dancing freely at a night club with a lover flow directly into memories of dancing to a Paul Simon song with his mother, then into a discussion of what the loss of a freedom of movement has meant for Jones. The embarrassment when Jones's mother discovered his search for gay porn on her work computer as a child is linked with his consideration of why certain gestures or behaviours are considered "flamboyant," and why those gestures or behaviours may incite violence.

Jones's state of mind is further expressed in the work through the vocal and dance performances of the chorus. Children's voices provide the backdrop for Jones's words, though they do not speak any words themselves, vocalizing with sounds and humming. They contribute powerful emotions that reinforce the emotional effect of the action and speech between the characters. When their music is harmonious and joyful, they sing the love and forgiveness of Jones's story, but when their music is dissonant and unsettling, they communicate Jones's struggles with mental health following the physical attack he endured. His mental distress, as he attempts to cope with anger and frustration through substance use, is represented by a jarring, droning resonance that builds to discomfort until it is broken by one of the characters.

Of note, much of the humour comes from the presence of the young people on stage. During the story about Jones's mother finding porn on her work computer, for example, the characters turn to the chorus and have them plug their ears and sing. At times the chorus sits still on their stools, directing their focus towards their conductor. At other times, they move closer to Jones, sitting casually on the floor or the risers, arms around each other as they listen to Jones's words and sing his experiences. At one point they circle Jones as they sing, each chorus member lightly touching his shoulder as they pass, lending their support as Jones watches his story unfold. As the program notes indicate, the children represent "the spirit of the child part of him that was lost." They wear swatches of light blue cloth, the colour of the cardigan that the audience later learns was cut from Jones by the paramedics and

was never seen again. The cardigan, representing comfort, safety, and innocence, is now dispersed among a group of caring and talented young people, who will carry his message and his artistic mentorship with them as they grow.

Near the end of the work, the chorus lines up at the front of the stage as they sing a multi-part harmony. One by one, the children stop singing and return to sit around Jones until two young boys remain — the dancer (Lennox Blue Powell) and a slightly older boy. The two boys continue to sing as they look at each other, then they face the back of the stage. Powell returns to his seat, leaving the other boy alone. He stops singing and turns to the audience, shrugging his shoulders and looking helpless. Behind him one of his friends opens her arms and welcomes him into an embrace, rocking and humming as the rest of the stage is silent and still. This sequence questions the larger societal implications of such a crime — which of these young people could end up on either end of that knife in 15 years' time? Jones's process of acknowledging his forgiveness and anger towards Shane includes a consideration of how our society is broken enough to permit such hate crimes to occur in the first place.

Later, Powell performs a sequence of soaring jumps and turns — leaping across the stage, onto and off of the risers and the ramp, the squeaking of his sneakers mingling with the piano accompaniment. He stands at the top of the curve of the risers, head thrown back and arms wide as he turns in a slow circle, movements that mirror the earlier freedom Character #1 expressed as he danced at a night club in Montreal. The repetition of this movement reinforces the connection of the children, the characters, and Jones. The dancing child is still in Jones, but his freedom to move in that way was stolen from him on the night of the attack.

The work nears its conclusion with a question for Jones. He turns to face the audience and the characters ask: does he forgive Shane today? Jones's answer is different each night. Tonight, he shares that he forgave Shane before he knew how the attack would affect him. Listening to his own words at the official premiere of this work while

feeling the love facing him from the performers onstage and from the audience at his back, he is unable to answer the question. There is space for anger and forgiveness at the same time in this performance. The obvious support and care shown by the immensely talented artists as they contribute to the sharing of Jones's story reinforces his message: you will choose love over fear.

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