

CYMI: Crippled was a triumph

Play tackles the struggles of loss and disability

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When the play was over, and my girlfriend asked me if I was tearing up near the end, I asked, "Weren't you?!" When she started to shake her head back and forth, I found myself questioning whether or not she actually had any emotions. How could you not tear up at the end of that play? I left out the fact that numerous times throughout the event I found myself tearing up, not just at the end. She didn't need to know that.

I went into Crippled with high expectations, but even those couldn't amount to how spectacular the show was. The play is based on a true story about a man who lived his whole life with a disability. When he his partner of almost a decade passed away, he has found himself struggling to move on and accept the loss. His partner was able to make him feel like his disability wasn't a bad thing, but without his partner, he found himself hating it all over again.

The show tackles many tough issues surrounding disabilities, death, and homosexuality. The entire production took the

form of a one-on-one conversation, with a few clever scene changes intertwined as one of the characters describes a memory. The conversation and the dialogue felt real, and those scene changes helped tell the story.

In the opening, the main character Tony (played by the playwright himself, Paul David Power) stands alone on the edge of a wharf in St. John's harbor in the middle of the night. He throws his crutches into the water one by one, and he looks longingly at the splashing waves before a stranger appears (played by Pat Dempsey). The two begin to talk, and talk, and talk. One scene in particular, of a gay bar downtown, was repeated multiple times, once from Tony's perspective, once from the stranger's, and once during a scenario in Tony's head about what would happen if he wasn't disabled.

The projected background was something that amazed me right from the start. Usually, I'm not a fan of projections because a lot of the time they just take me out of the play because they don't really fit, but this one was

outstanding. It was a blurred view of downtown St. John's as if you were standing on the harbor. It really made you actually feel like you were there, but that's not the best part; the background was constantly moving and you could see headlights of cars that were driving down the road and even once you saw a person walk across the bottom of the screen. It felt like somebody was just sitting downtown and playing a live feed from the harbor. (As I learned later in an interview with Power, Robert Gauthier, the technical director for the hall, actually went downtown and captured about an hour's worth of footage of the harbor just so there was no looping where the audience would see the same person or car drive by over and over. That's some dedication...)

The show also went above and beyond to be accessible to all kinds of people. On the night that I went, they had ASL interpretation. In one of the earlier shows, they had audio description for the visually impaired. The ASL interpreters were extremely skilled and did not just sign the words, but acted the emotions

that were being shown on stage. They had two interpreters (for the two main actors on stage). Their faces and bodies moved to the flow of the show, and I often found myself glancing over to them to see what they were doing.

One of the shows was a “Pay-What-You-Can” event that was a more “relaxed” performance. This entailed a change in theatre etiquette, where it’s okay to get up, move around, leave the room for a bit, or even make noise. There are many conditions that make it hard to sit for long periods of time or to stay quiet and this performance is meant to allow all people to still be able to attend and watch the show. The lights were also turned up a bit, so the theatre wasn’t as dark, since that can also be a mental trigger for many.

The LSPU hall itself, where the production was performed, was very accessible to wheelchairs, and there were about 7 or 8 people in wheelchairs on the night that I attended. I was very pleased at how much effort they put in so that every kind of person was able to see this show. I hope that we start to see more changes like these in the arts, and in society in general.

The show obviously had a dark and sad tone to it, but the use of comedy was extremely well done, especially in the beginning. The lighthearted character Evan brightly contrasted Tony. He added a lot of life to the show, and was played extraordinarily well by Dempsey, who I had met a year ago during the local high schools’ DramaFest. He is a technician for the LSPU Hall, and I had no idea he acted as well, until I was blown away

by this performance. His character really added a touch of Newfoundland to the play, and his lines always had the crowd in stitches. The play hit on many big ideas all at once, and continued to make strong points about topics that are often ignored. I was constantly thinking- if I wasn’t busy laughing or crying.

Tony spent a while talking about how society has views people with disabilities as lesser; that they are weak, or that they aren’t as good as “normal” people. He mentioned how the term “crippled” is just a label that people use to identify him. As a boy, he was always known as “the cripple.” Throughout his life, people looked at him and the first thing they saw was the disability, and instantly, they judged him. People assumed that he was incapable of doing certain things and they had certain expectations. Tony talked about these experiences made him feel alienated growing up, and how it made him feel like he was weak and that he wasn’t as good as everybody else.

A lot of people will see somebody with a disability and jump to their aid, running to open the door for them or pulling away a chair for them. They think they’re doing a good deed, but a lot of times it makes the person they’re helping feel lesser. It makes that person realize that they are different, and that that is what people see first and foremost. The simplest way to help somebody without making them feel inferior is to just ask.

At one point in the play, Tony was having a conversation in a bar and the guy he was talking to mentioned that it must have been a struggle to have gotten down here with his condition, and he congratulated him for it. He

felt so looked down upon by this random guy that he started to feel sorry for himself and hate who he was again. It goes to show that what may seem like a harmless comment to one, or even a simple good deed can be taken badly by another. These people may not mean harm, but they end up causing it anyways.

He did make the point, however, that these kinds of comments don’t make someone a bad person. A lot of times, people can hear what they want to hear, as is the case with the bar scenario. Later, the bar scene was replayed from Evan’s view, who witnessed the entire thing. He pointed out the comments the stranger in the bar said, may not have been as bad as Tony pictured them. Tony expected the guy to look down on him, when in reality, he wasn’t. The other guy was actually just as nervous, if not more, than Tony was to be there. It reminds us that we don’t necessarily know what is going on in somebody else’s head, and they could be having their own struggles that they’re dealing with. It’s hard, but especially in a day where mental illnesses are becoming less stigmatized and more accepted, people need to start looking beyond just what they see on the outside. It’s impossible to know somebody else’s struggle, and we should be careful not to assume one thing or the other.

Tony also mentioned at one point how he felt tired of always having to fight. He wishes he could just stop, and just feel normal. So many people who struggle with disabilities always feel like they have to fight, physically physical or mentally. It feels like life always has one up on you and no matter what you do you can’t get it to stop. I’ve had my own struggle with

this, and at times in my life I've felt exhausted with the fight. This bit really hit home for me, and I know it hits home for so many others out there. I admired how real Power made it so easy for everybody to connect and understand his struggle.

Tony's partner Jonathan was able to make Tony feel normal. He made it feel like life didn't have to be a constant fight anymore. But when Tony lost Jonathan, life went right back to where it was before. Tony found himself struggling to move on and live his life the way Jonathan would have wanted. The thing about death is that it leaves so many unanswered questions. It leaves a hole in the person who still survived.

Tony refused to meet anybody new after Jonathan because he felt like he was letting Jonathan down and betraying him. He felt that moving on and leaving Jonathan in the past was betraying him. He felt alone, and he didn't know what to do. The emotions that were portrayed in the show really got to me. In real life, Power also lost his partner, and this play was his way of moving on and creating a legacy for Jonathan. All the emotion that he had wasn't just acting, it was real. This made it so much more than just a play.

As the show delved deeper into Tony's past, Tony and Evan yelled at each other more and more, and the tension continued to rise. Tony hated everything. He hated having to be disabled. He hated how Jonathan had to be the one to die. He hated all the things that he couldn't get out of his head. Everything he felt, we felt.

When Tony told the story of the last night he was with Jonathan, the entire theatre cried with him. And when Tony described how he did over 800 chest compressions to try and keep Jonathan alive, despite not being able to do it right because of his disability, we all felt his struggle.

Jonathan had a heart defect from birth, and one day at home, it just caused his heart to stop. No matter what Tony did, no matter how much he tried, it wouldn't have saved him. Yet Tony blamed himself, and he blamed his disability, saying how if he wasn't so broken he could have done it right, and he could have saved him.

Tony found himself only able to write about Jonathan after he passed. It was something he mentioned before in the play. Near the end, the background cut out, and the lights turned up. Tony looked confused, and he looked up to the lighting booth, yelling at them to turn it back on because he had more to tell- more scenes to show.

He was told that it was over. That the audience had to go home. He needed to move on. He struggled with it, and he fought it. He said he just wanted to share Jonathan's story. He was told that he had – that these people (the audience) wouldn't forget it, and that it was all beautiful. He was told that it was okay to live his own life, and that he wasn't betraying Jonathan. He was told it wasn't his fault for his death.

Breaking the fourth wall was perhaps the strongest part for me. It made me realize how real this entire thing was for me. As Tony/Paul finished telling their story, they had come to

accept the loss they had gone through. They had been able to accept what was gone, while still honoring them in the best way they could.

Death is scary. Death is uncertain. Death could appear around any corner out of nowhere. The hardest part about death is what it leaves for the living. This play was Paul's way to move on and live his life after loss. It took him many years to reach that point, and it will take others as long, if not longer.

The important take-away from this play is that it's okay to live your own life after you lose a loved one. It isn't betraying them. In reality, I like to think it's making them proud of you. I think it's also important to remember that everybody around us has their own struggles, so you should be careful what you say and do. For those who may have a disability, we need to do our best to make them feel accepted and normal, not inferior. I have known disabled people for the last 7 years of my life, but this show was still a wake-up call to me to be more careful and accepting towards everybody in life. Life is a bitch, but if we all work together I think we can make it through just fine.

Power Productions, Paul's theatre company, plans to do more productions of this play in Atlantic Canada in the future. If you never got to catch it this time around, keep an eye out because it is an experience you won't want to miss. I won't forget this one for a long time.