

May 31, 2021

To Whom It May Concern:

This is a response to the University of Texas at Arlington's virtual production of *Moving Forward*, presented October 23-25, 2020, directed by Austin Eyer.

In a very challenging year, in which many university theatre programs halted theatre production altogether, Austin Eyer took on the task of creating an original musical with a diverse cast of twelve in three weeks time, social distancing, creating and rehearsing the show online. This combination of factors is a herculean task.

The subtitle reveals one of the major missions Mr. Eyer had for the show: Amplifying the Voices of Tomorrow by Empowering Them Today. The innovative performances of the students as well as the student testimonials in the dramaturgy of the show attest to how successfully Mr. Eyer was in empowering these students in a number of ways. The devising process he used encouraged the students to express themselves and explore what they had to say.

Moreover, rather than allowing the demands of conceiving and rehearsing the show online to be a stultifying disadvantage, Mr. Eyer used it as an opportunity to enlist the help of three Broadway professionals to assist in creating the show. Working with Broadway professionals is, of course, exciting for the students, but to have them assist you in finding your own voice and expressing yourself with your own words takes that excitement and that support to another level. It is evident from the bios of these professionals that their dedication to this project was in speaking to "the whole person" as they addressed and worked with the students. It is apparent that Mr. Eyer chose these guest artists well, not only for their skillsets, and creativity, but for their personal inspiration as well.

The show is episodic in nature and the eclecticism of the modes of delivery I found to be part of its charm. I was never quite sure where we were going next and I found that to be a part of the fun and adventure of viewing the show. Given more than the protracted time constraints in which they worked, the musical thread could connect the pieces more smoothly, but that is a minor issue. The cohesion of the show lay in the timeliness of the topics addressed, the sincerity of the performances, and the title song that surfaced in a number of different places. I couldn't help but feel as I was watching the show that I was watching a family of individuals who really cared for each other and who supported each other in having the courage to share their feelings on some very challenging topics.

I was impressed by the quality of the video production as well as the sound. Simply coordinating the voices of 12 people is no small feat. The show was extremely timely. Airing in late October, the upcoming election was one of the things they were thinking about. "What is one word you can use to describe how you feel about this election?" That sequence leading to the post-its that spelled out VOTE, was timely, but not heavy handed.

The show lives up to its title. It is thought provoking and touching. It appears to have been very empowering for the students, encouraging them to dig deep, express themselves, support each other and be proactive. Mr. Eyer, his guest artists, the cast and the entire production team are to be commended on their creation of an entertaining and thought-provoking piece that speaks directly to current issues in a very personal, compelling way, while galvanizing his students to claim their voices and to keep moving forward no matter what challenges they face. Congratulations!

*Michael Ellison*