Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Line Jabs Like a Needle of Truth

David Sheward · Wednesday, July 15th, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the closures of theaters and reinforced the feeling of being in suspended animation. With no live dramatic reaction to this national crisis which has brought all of our lives to a near screeching halt, it feels as if there has been scant considered reflection or introspection—just talking heads endlessly pontificating on cable news shows and a disconnected chief executive engaging in magical thinking. We have had Richard Nelson's Apple Family Zoom plays give us some perspective through an artistic lens, and now the Public Theater has commissioned documentary theater-makers Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen to assemble the heart-breaking real-life stories of first responders in a unique, interwoven series of monologues called *The Line*, available on the Public's YouTube channel through Aug. 4.

Allison Pill and Santino Fontana in *The Line.*

Blank and Jensen have previously chronicled the lives of wrongfully convicted death-row inmates in the Drama Desk Award-winning *The Exonerated* and those effected by the Upper Big Branch mining explosion in *Coal Country*, which abruptly closed when all Broadway and Off-Broadway theaters shuttered in March. Here through verbatim interviews, they examine the experiences of seven health-care workers right on the front lines of our current national emergency. But don't call them heroes. While all seven recount gut-wrenching stories of personal bravery and sacrifice, *The Line* is far from a weepy Lifetime TV-movie. Each character, played with unswerving intensity and a lack of sentimentality by a rock-solid cast, speak into their laptops and asks the viewer to listen to their tales of devastation not with pity but anger.

Nurses Vikram (Arjun Gupta) and Dwight (Nicholas Pinnock) connect the skyrocketing infection rate to the woefully inadequate medical services provided to black and brown communities. ICU nurse David (Santino Fontana), a former actor, tells of being overwhelmed with cases in his own NYC hospital and then having to supervise by phone the care of his favorite uncle in an understaffed facility in New Jersey. Fontana subtly shifts from endearing charm while relating David's tales of using his theatrical training in his medical duties to professionally contained calm while masking immeasurable sorrow with his harrowing COVID anecdotes.

Lorraine Toussaint, Santino Fontana, and John Ortiz in *The Line*.
Credit: Public Theater

Geriatric care supervisor Sharon (Lorraine Toussaint) must cope not only with scores of her

residents succumbing to the virus, but her own infection, caring for two grandchildren and the inadequate bureaucratic response to the needs of her staff. Toussaint is particularly moving when she relates Sharon's furious protest to a grief counselor who will only be administering a professional workshop for one day. "It's too little, too late," she passionately cries.

Arjun Gupta in *The Line*.
Credit: Public Theater

First-year intern Jennifer (Allison Pill) reels from exhaustion and the oppressive weight of her personal protective gear, as well as the emotional duress the crisis inflicts. EMT Ed (Jamey Sheridan) bluntly compares his COVID duties to his war-zone experiences in third-world combat hot spots. Perhaps the most heartbreaking moment is delivered by Oscar (John Ortiz), an ambulance driver-turned-EMT, describing the arduous efforts of his team to save a patient, only to arrive at the Emergency Room to discover there are no available beds. After conveying the almost manic exhilaration of rescuing a fellow human being from death's door, Ortiz's body visibly deflates when confronted with the grim reality of a lack of space for his charge.

Running slightly over an hour, *The Line* is a quick, body-shaking blast of cold air in the midst of a arid, blank no man's land. We are now in a nearly empty theatrical space. *The Line* pierces through it like a needle of truth.

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