

Theatre Aurora's 'Lonely Planet' helps actors grapple with challenging times on stage and off



Over the course of COVID-19, York Region teacher Chris Cluff saw his world close around him.

Remote learning paused face-to-face interaction with his students, COVID made going outside less attractive, and he looked on, as so many of us did, as friends waged battle with the virus.

'My own personal operating system was telling me, 'Stay safe, stay home, stay out of rotation,' he says.

But he's out there once again, this time wearing his actor's hat, as one of two stars of *Lonely Planet*, a play by Steven Deitz, which opens this Thursday, May 5, at Theatre Aurora.

Lonely Planet, which runs on select dates and times through May 14, follows Jody and Carl, two gay men in an American city living through the AIDS epidemic.

Cluff plays Jody, the owner of a map store, who, despite opening the eyes of others to the beauty that can be found around the world, finds his life becoming increasingly insular, as his community wages war against an invisible enemy.

Sound familiar? It did to Cluff, as he eagerly set to work bringing Jody to life.

'I couldn't get it out of my head,' he says. 'I read the synopsis and thought, 'Wow, I feel like part of Jody's character. I was kind of living that story just after two years of being enclosed with COVID and being kind of stuck in a place, observing many of my friends trying to make decisions on what does it all mean?'

For the audition process, Cluff was asked to bring in a story about lived experiences coming through the pandemic. There was, of course, no shortage of experiences to draw upon and this process was punctuated by Cluff's discovery that he hadn't 'really reconciled what it meant to be out in the world again.'

'It is mind-blowing to go through my everyday life, which is still in pandemic style, and someone will say something that is almost word for word a line from the play ' and they have never read it and they might not even know I am in it,' he says. 'I won't be able to leave this damned thing when I am in the play because I am leaving it and going back into the pandemic; it's twisty and mind-blowing.'

Delving into the characters, one thing that particularly struck Cluff about both Jody and Carl is how they care ? Carl for humanity and Jody for the LGBTQ+ community.

?The thing that would be one of the greatest human losses and the equivalent to injury, long-term disability and pain would be the belief that we no longer have access to our communities and no matter what you may feel about wanting to socialize, we have a fear of each other,? says Cluff. ?Carl's character does a wonderful job of reminding my character about that: you can't live in your head, you exist but you don't live.

?Death and caring for people who are sick is part of living and that, for me, has been part of making it through my own personal pandemic. I have had friends who have become sick, people I know in my community who have died. It raises existential question of, ?How much was I there? Was I there for other people when I was so much trying to protect my own four-person unit in my house of my spouse and my two kids? There is still a human expectation that we stay connected as a community in some way and Carl is consistently reminding Jody of that and you do see the cost in the play.?

None of us, he says, can possibly know how our own ?pandemic story? is going to end, but there is a clear ending for Jody and Carl and the health crisis they are both left to navigate.

Going through this process, says Cluff, has given him a ?new framework? to think about all the ?randomness? and ?abstract? ideas that have come out of the last two years of the pandemic.

?This production has given me the opportunity to kind of test my bravery and it is a little bit of a litmus test: am I ready to be out in the world?? he says. ?Maybe this can be a part of a broader process of what does it mean to be out in the world? What's wonderful is everyone's process of figuring out how much 'real world' they can tolerate. It's quite mesmerizing that we're in a play that is connected to something that is related to our current circumstances and we may not have full seats (in the audience given people's current comfort level of sitting shoulder to shoulder). How much more meta could it be??

Lonely Planet, directed by Sergio Calderon, opens this Thursday, May 5, at Theatre Aurora. For dates, times and ticket information, visit theatreaurora.com or call 905-727-3669.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter