

Director's Concept Statement--Jenny McConnell Frederick

CHAMBERS OF THE HEART

November 2016

Concept

CHAMBERS OF THE HEART was conceived of as a fully immersive dance theatre piece set in the beautiful Josephine Butler Parks Center, an 18,000 sq ft, 40-room Renaissance-revival style mansion overlooking Malcolm X Park. Cynthia Word, Artistic Director of Word Dance Theatre wanted to explore the theme of love through a previously choreographed body of work inspired by Isadora Duncan. I was brought on to conceive of, develop and direct the theatrical components of the piece.

Creating an immersive experience provides the unique opportunity to allow the guests to leave their own world behind for a moment and enter a new one of our own design. I proposed that we build an oasis from the chaos and conflict taking place in the real world.



We would shape the space into a sanctuary for the broken-hearted and the love-drunk alike -- a place to mourn lost loves, relish sweet memories and look in on other's passions--a place to embrace empathy and the universal aspects of love. As the experience progressed, audiences would engage all five sense and come out at the end having experienced a kind of catharsis,

culminating in a rebirth and renewal of spirit as they left the space. The full team of artists

employed included five actors, seven dancers, eight playwrights, two opera singers, a pianist, a guitarist and composer, four choreographers and installation artists as well as costume, sound and lighting designers.

Development

I began by assembling a team of playwrights that included DC-based writers Thambi Duncan, Mary Hall Surface, Randy Baker, Graziella Jackson, Natalie Piegari, Catherine Tripp, James L. Rogers and LA-based playwright Steve Yockey. I gave each writer a video of one of the dance pieces choreographed for the project and asked them to write a love letter inspired by what they saw. Those letters served as the road map for the theatrical components. Actors and dancers performed excerpts of the letters. The letters served as a foundation for joining ceremonies, rituals, courting and venting. I created a script for the actors that set the framework for the evening, laid out expectations for audience members and guided them through the space. Together, Cynthia and I experimented with the placement of dances throughout the mansion, identifying rooms, emotions and colors that would carry forward our narrative.



Design & Audience Experience

The audience experience served as our touch stone in creating the world for CHAMBERS OF THE HEART. We felt strongly that the architecture of the space should be given room to speak for itself. Dancers draped themselves on doorways, opera singers sang outside on the balcony as audience entered, an actor shadowed an elusive dancer up and down staircases. Audiences engaged all five senses with live music, lush landscapes, real wood burning in fireplaces, hands-on art installations and candy edibles throughout the space. The love letters written by the playwrights were handwritten on stationery and distributed throughout the house. Audience

members received them as gifts from dancers and discovered them in unexpected corners. The lighting designer pioneered new technology with remote controlled LED lights provided by Pixel Lumen Productions which allowed our stage manager to move throughout the space controlling the lights on a ipad as the evening progressed. Two art installations further enhanced the audience experience. A rock garden occupied a hidden room where audience members discovered rocks emblazoned with words of love. Here they were invited to explore the weight of the words they held. In another long hallway, I created a 12' high immersive experience, *Casa de Guilietta*. Guests were surrounded by an enormous collage of love letters, images of love and other ephemera. In the tunnel they were invited to answer questions like "In what season did you first fall in love?", "Who broke your heart?", "What is the scent of love?". CHAMBERS opened just days after the 2016 presidential election. At the first performance I watched a guest pass through the *Casa de Guilietta* space several times, taking it in. Finally she paused, and slowly, deliberately removed the "Hillary for President" sticker still affixed to her coat. She gently pressed the sticker onto the *Guilietta* wall. In that moment was an acknowledgment of a great loss, a tribute left to love and a private moment to mourn. This kind of human connection was an ideal example of the engagement we aspired to. As the evening progressed the doors to the balcony were thrown open and cool gusts of November air blew through rooms. Dancers dragged falling leaves in from the balcony as they moved. Nature itself served as its own design element.



Overall, CHAMBERS OF THE HEART offered an enormous multi-sensorial experience that was visceral and emotional.

“Duncan was not known for constraint, she was known for passion. And at this Word Dance Theater succeeded. They truly put it all out on the table, and the audience ate it up.” --DC Dance Journalism Project