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‘Psychopomp’ is a Walk with Purpose (Review)

San Francisco-based We Players’ guided meditative journey is a reminder of what we’ve had all along



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There's something just inherently nice about going for a walk outside. Of course, it's also pretty much the only thing we've been consistently able to do for the last year or so. As the world around us shut down, theaters and parks closed, and restaurants pivoted to take out, the one place many of us could find any refuge from the terrified monotony of our four walls was in green, natural, open air space. Well masked, and from a safe distance, human beings cautiously sought out the familiar in an unfamiliar world — from exercise, to picnics, to romance. And when we realized that our forests and parks and hiking trails were relatively safe from the invisible yet ever present danger, we began to move more and more of our pre-pandemic lives outside. Restaurants staked their claim on sidewalks and in parklets. Drive-in movie theaters saw a brief resurgence. Fitness and dance found its way onto fields and parking lots. Our social and cultural existence just packed up and moved outdoors.

And in so doing, the outdoors felt different. It felt safe and routine. The blue sky no longer represented the great natural expanse, but rather an opportunity to glimpse lost friends from a distance when a screen would no longer cut it. It was an opportunity to taste new food that hadn't been purchased during a mad terrified dash through that most dangerous of chores, the grocery store. For the more petulant among us, it was a chance to take off a piece of fabric that had somehow become a symbol of imagined oppression. Mostly, the outdoors was defined less by its own intrinsic beauty and more by escape from the indoors. Exploring the wilderness no longer felt like an adventure. Camping was no longer "roughing it," but rather a safer alternative to hotels. Eating al fresco was no longer a luxury, but a necessary concession that led to a nationwide shortage of patio heaters as diners struggled to make the gathering beneath the stars tolerable. Running through a park was just an alternative to crowded gyms, and the exquisite splendor of our National Parks somehow a consolation prize while the

carousels and castles of shuttered theme parks remained dark under a firework-less sky.



Photo by Lauren Matley, courtesy of We Players

So it made perfect sense that my first foray back into a non-virtual immersive experience took place in a park. Of course it would. We Players' *PSYCHOPOMP* takes place in McLaren Park in San Francisco — a hilly green area, previously unvisited by me, best known to dog walkers and in a cool foggy area of a cool foggy city. “Dress in layers,” I was warned. It was going to be cold.

It seemed a foregone conclusion — could *PSYCHOPOMP* happen anywhere else? Certainly not. Fortunately though, this was not solely due to pandemic necessity, but also because McLaren Park was as much a character in the production as any one of the skilled, enthusiastic, colorful cast of characters I met along the way. The idea that site specific theater would incorporate its

location so well in its production is certainly not novel, but as we emerge from this period of outdoor-by-necessity, the idea of going outside didn't register as a choice. The last few months have been so preoccupied by a thrilling return to the indoors — bars, theme park rides, theater — that choosing to take an audience on a walk through a park struck me as a particularly mundane concession to a world on the brink of normalcy but still struggling to cross the finish line. I was excited to experience theater again, but dreading the venue.



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It took about 20 seconds to disabuse me of that notion. I stood in front of the Preparateur, who welcomed me to the park and transported me to the realm of the liminal, home of the Poms, whose paths I would cross as I travelled. “Close your eyes,” she instructed me. “Relish the stillness. It never lasts long.” And I stood there, with my eyes closed. For longer than I would've expected — so long that I honestly thought I had missed the instruction to open them

again. She told me to feel the ground beneath my feet. To feel the wind on my face and the sky above me. It had been so long since I'd just stood still and took in my surroundings that something as obvious as embracing and enjoying nature felt so novel and thrilling that it took my breath away. And as she sent me on my way, I found myself suddenly equally excited by the park, as by what I would experience within it. "Walk with purpose," she told me.

Initially I didn't think much of it. It's a large park, and I had a lot of ground to cover (I only got lost once, thanks to plentiful trail markers and a helpful map provided at the start of the journey). But as my walk brought me in contact with gods and creatures, each unique and exciting, and integrated with the landscape around them, I realized the meaning of her words were twofold. Yes, if I wanted to reach my journey's end by nightfall, my pace should be brisk. But also, the liminal space between interactions was as important to this journey as the actors themselves, and I tried to imbue each step with thought and intention. I walked with purpose, possibly for the first time since the world so irrevocably changed. I felt the cold wind on my face. I tripped on unsteady ground, and I felt my breath quicken as I struggled to climb a hill. In a time when everyone is so sick and tired of being forced to be alone and outside, I found myself so utterly thrilled to be alone and outside that I could barely understand it.



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None of this should diminish the wonderful performances of each member of the We Players ensemble. Each encounter along the way I was brought face to face with mythical figures and creatures who have guided humans through the liminal for centuries. Some told their stories in theatrical monologues, some through dance and movement. Some figures I recognized immediately. Some I still haven't figured out. The cast was small, but there were no weak spots, and standouts included our nautical guide across the River Styx, as well as a particularly eloquent feline who succeeded in making his exposition on quantum physics feel as spiritual and enlightening as the zealous religious cries of Anubis. Each stop represented a different way we as humans have understood the natural world and our place within it. And when I stepped off the path and back into the parking lot, I felt like they had succeeded in that task once more.



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Unfortunately, it must be mentioned that one cast member, Regina Leon, was unfortunately very seriously injured in a non-show related accident and was hospitalized. Her station was unattended, a thoughtful, quiet experience guided by signs. Instructed to drop a piece of salt into a bowl of water, watching as it dissolved, becoming invisible and yet changing the water fundamentally — a meditation of the transience of the natural world and us within it. It was also, unavoidably, a moment of reflection on the past year. As the world and all its people emerge from this unimaginable darkness — we are broken and mourning and tired — the last year gradually fades from view like that block of salt, I am ready to finally emerge into the light of a foggy cold dog park ready to once again “walk with purpose.”

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PSYCHOPOMP currently runs through June 27th. Tickets are \$130 for up to 2 people.

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