



James Aaron Oh and Matt Weimer in 'PrEP Play.' Photo by Lois Tema.

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Review: Time-tripping back to the height of AIDS in 'PrEP Play'

By CHARLES LEWIS III APRIL 13, 2022



I'm not frequently asked why I mention the COVID procedures of every venue I attend, but when I am asked, I always have the same answer: "Because the pandemic isn't over." Really, it's something I shouldn't have to explain, but that's what happens when elected leaders act as if **this deadly virus is no big deal**. I mention it every review to reflect how safe I did or didn't feel – which will affect my perception of the art – and to help you make informed decisions about your own safety for these recreational events.

To their credit, NCTC's procedures are better than most (vax and ID at the door, checkered seating in the theatres, HVAC system exceeding ACH and MERV standards), but could still be improved (check for boosters, actually scan the QR codes). Besides, of all the shows in which I feel obligated to report protocol enforcement, the world premiere of an HIV/AIDS dramedy would be at the top of that list.



James Aaron Oh and Matt Weimer in 'PrEP Play.' Photo by Lois Tema.

PrEP Play, or Blue Parachute (through May 8) is a story involving that little blue pill used for sex. No, not that one—the one that **helps prevent the spread of HIV**. In 2018 New York, it's a pill used by “Erik-with a ‘k’” (James Aaron Oh), a millennial Chinese immigrant who came out when he came Stateside. His math teacher-boyfriend Bryant (Matt Weimer) is a Gen-Xer who remembers the height of HIV/AIDS epidemic, so he never indulges in vices Erik takes for granted. In particular, Bryant never got over the death of close friend Jared (Troy Rockett), a relationship central to his published memoir.

Erik still hasn't read it. Attempting to finally do so proves so boring that he drowns his PrEP-fueled system in liquor and CBD edibles. That's when he literally finds himself in the

story of the book, walking around 1986 New York in the younger body of his current boyfriend, giving him the chance to “cure” Bryant of his cautious nature. And if that weren't enough, he finds himself chatting with an actual PrEP pill, though she prefers the name “Agent 701” (Akaina Ghosh).

I see in my notes that as I was watching *PrEP Play* I recalled titles like Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic*, and even Francis Coppola's *Peggy Sue Got Married*. I don't know if any of those were a specific influence, but playwright Yilong Liu's script resembles the latter in terms of tone. That's not surprising, given that Erik's inability to finish Bryant's book is due to the fact he considers it yet another clichéd tragic AIDS story, of which there were many 20 and 30 years ago. (If you've seen *Boys on the Side*, *It's My Party*, or *Our Sons*, then you've seen all the genre has to offer.) Hell, Erik comments on the surreal goings-on by saying they felt “very Tony Kushner.”



Akaina Ghosh in 'PrEP Play.' Photo by Lois Tema

But therein exists the generation gap between Erik and Bryant: The latter knows that no one is invincible because he's seen first-hand just how devastating AIDS can be. What's

more, he emphasizes that AIDS was never cured, nor did it go away. I don't think it's coincidence that Liu's play is partly set in 2018, the year before the next great plague revealed itself. Erik gets a rush from the thrill of unprotected sex, especially if there's an element of danger; not unlike unmasked partiers who often spawn new COVID variants. Bryant needs to loosen up and Erik needs to settle down—something that does make one wonder how they got together in the first place.

Erik's journey back to '86 is brought to its aforementioned Kushner-esque life by designer Carlos Aceves, who bathes the set in blue light throughout a great deal of the show. He surrounds the audience with paper planes along the walls (the names of those who succumbed to AIDS, as provided by cast, crew, and audience members), making the most prominent set piece a raised platform for which the simple design hides a series of creative transformations.

Though Erik is, for all intents and purposes, the main character, played amiably by the baby-faced Oh, it's Ghosh as the woman-identified Agent 701 who guides us along as a one-person Greek chorus. Sporting all black with a blue floral pattern on a Marisely Cortés-designed top, 701 provides sage-like guidance for Erik—when not taking the form of someone he interacts with—while explaining historical details to the audience; often with the aid of an electric six-string. “Ethereal-yet-relatable” is becoming a specialty for Ghosh, and this is the latest of **many fine performances** on their resume.

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Troy Rockett in 'PrEP Play.' Photo by Lois Tema

Matt Weimer, whom I last saw in 2018 in [another NCTC AIDS drama](#), brings a good Niles Crane-ish reservation to his performance as Bryant, neurotically cautious and still heartbroken. Finally, there's Troy Rockett as the tragic Jared. Rockett and Liu make Jared into an almost meta take on the "tragic gay" character, attempting to add shades to the stereotype and openly acknowledging his uniqueness (already infected, he refuses to take part in a trial for a PrEP predecessor, citing America's frequent use of Black people as unwilling test subjects).

Though Liu's script can occasionally miss the forest for the trees (a brief acknowledgement of Erik inhabiting a white body gives a quick laugh, but goes nowhere) it's strongest when it suggests time as a river always correcting itself; that the death of Jared changing Bryant was always something that was bound to happen, no matter how much a time traveler tries to change things. It's a lesson in survivor's guilt that's easy to forget.

It's not a perfect show, but *PrEP Play* serves as a tragicomic reminder why contagious public illnesses should be taken seriously. If they were, NCTC wouldn't need protocols for one virus in place for a show about another one.

PrEP PLAY, OR BLUE PARACHUTE runs through May 8 in the Walker Theatre of the New Conservatory Theatre Center, San Francisco. Tickets and information [here](#).