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THEATER REVIEW

THEATER: 'CONCEPT' REVIVED

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"THE CONCEPT" is a play that should not have had to be revived. In its time, the late 1960's, it was a powerful social document, both as psychodrama and as a commentary on drug addiction. Now, in 1986, the drug problem is, if anything, even more acute and widespread. The sad truth is that the play retains its timeliness. In fact, one would add that "The Concept," which opened last night at Circle in the Square (Downtown), is the first necessary event of the theatrical season.

For those who do not know "The Concept," the play derives from Daytop Village, a New York drug rehabilitation center that has been in the forefront in the recovery of people from drug addiction. First done as an in-house exercise, it was developed by the director Lawrence Sacharow into a public performance piece - and had an extended engagement Off Broadway, with a cast composed entirely of recovering addicts, who told, in confessional form, about their own experiences.

As redirected by Mr. Sacharow, "The Concept" has been reshaped around the personal stories of the members of the present company, none of them professional actors, all addressed on stage by their own names. With the assistance of the playwright Casey Kurtti in structuring the text, the play is as close to a firsthand message as one might expect - short of sitting in on a three-day marathon encounter session at Daytop itself.

Inevitably, there is a certain amount of self-dramatization, as the cast members weave their own fictions and create personas - the young man who thinks others "respect" him because he is a drug dealer; the Irish-American who pretends to be a policeman so he can cash rubber checks at supermarkets. "The Concept" does not designate causes any more than it labels cures; it is more concerned with diagnosis. But both cause and cure are bound up in the descriptive process.

The eight men and women on stage - each individualized but representative of a multitude - come from diverse backgrounds, broader, as I remember, than those in the first "Concept." This time around, participants seem better educated, even the dropouts, and are more casual about their habit (cocaine and its derivative crack rather than heroin). They grew up with, or were not far from, drugs.

This is not to indicate that the case histories are any less telling. In fact, the opposite is true. Thus we have a pretty blonde woman (Jennifer McNeill), with the look of a street version of Madonna, who says, quite matter-of-factly, that she can tell her life story in 10 seconds - and then tells it in three: "I'm 16 and I don't give a . . . about anything." In the course of 90 compelling minutes, we learn to care about this young woman and her friends (and they are her friends), as they tell us about the depths of their despair, confused for too long a time with a high.

The last half of the evening is a re-enactment of "The Concept" method, a kind of group self-analysis, as the Daytop residents prod each other into the admission of loneliness and fear. As we watch, the eight become a family, and begin to fulfill one other's needs.

Initially there is active resistance and even rebellion. The central story concerns Carl Cohen, a college graduate turned part-time cabdriver who has landed at Daytop, because it was one of two alternatives offered to him by the court (The other was Attica). He bristles at the idea that he should speak about himself to strangers and has a sardonic comeback for every suggestion. When his peers tell him he is "stupid, a baby and a junkie," he questions only the word "baby," and responds that he would have characterized himself as "more towards immature." By the end of this impacted session, he is agreeing with his accusers.

It would be easy to regard the method as simplistic. Actually it is devious - a case of self-entrapment, as people are led to the recognition of their own failures, and not, as is often the case in fictional versions of the subject, to the shifting of responsibility to their parents and "society," both of which can be contributing factors. "The Concept" does not let addicts off the hook; the play makes it clear that they are victimizing themselves, that the treatment is designed as an eye-opener. Face yourself, face life and, in the play's single heartfelt message, allow yourself to love and to be loved - in other words, share yourself.

The new version of the play retains the original ending, in which the cast breaks the boundaries of theater and of therapy. As it was in 1968, the moment is a reaching out for responsiveness. Unless theatergoers have been hardened by overexposure to the problem, they will respond.

There is one added benefit to "The Concept." The eight participants are on their way to discovering a profession. Some of them, especially Mr. Cohen, seem to have a natural affinity for acting. As we can readily see, our "instructors" now have other options, beginning with theater, itself. "The Concept" reinforces one's belief in the possibility - and the urgency - of rehabilitation. Reaching Out THE CONCEPT, conceived and directed by Lawrence Sacharow; text by Casey Kurtti, in collaboration with the company; setting by Derek McLane; lighting by Frances Aronson; costumes by Marianne Powell-Parker. The Daytop Village production presented by Arthur Cantor. At Circle in the Square, Downtown, 159 Bleeker Street. WITH: Melechi Bellamy, Ursula Carambo, Carl Cohen, Deborah Davis, Anthony Fischetti, Jennifer McNeill, Richard Murphy and Michele Zampello.