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CULTURE



*Chemical Exile by Rorschach Theatre. Courtesy of Rorschach Theatre*

**On the Trails: Rorschach Theatre Sows Mystery Across the District**

April 20, 2022 @ 12:00pm | [Chad Kinsman](#)

Sitting on the steps of The Line DC, set back from the arboresque meeting of five streets, I take out a small packet, wrapped in blue tissue paper. I am far from alone in the afternoon bustle of Adams Morgan, but the paperback-sized bundle on my lap is an invitation into a story that no one else will see or hear but me. Inside, I find a few torn-out diary pages, a hand-drawn map a hand-drawn map two photographs, and a packet of animal crackers. I listen to a brief audio file—a surreptitiously recorded argument between a mother and daughter—and then set out on the second chapter [Rorschach Theatre’s](#) “Chemical Exile,” an immersive story set throughout the District, in both time and space, it turns out.

The second installment of [Rorschach’s ‘Pyschogeographies’ project](#) (the first, “Distance Frequencies,” wrapped up last summer), “Chemical Exile” sends participants to outdoor locations to experience a fictional narrative that mixes D.C. history, family drama, mystery, and metaphysics. The story, about what happens when Teddy, a renowned chemist, returns to a D.C. she doesn’t recognize, unfolds over eight chapters, which the company has been mailing out monthly since October 2021 (questers can join anytime). The tale will culminate in an in-person performance this July.

Three chapters in, I’m hooked. The first took me to the [Female Union Band and Mount Zion Cemeteries](#). Tucked away in eastern Georgetown, the joint cemeteries contain the final resting place of thousands of individuals: formerly enslaved, free, and freed Black persons, early white settlers, and their respective descendants. An unassuming brick vault built into a hillside was a purported stop on the Underground Railroad. It’s an indispensable memorial to the racial history of the District, one I admittedly did not know about before “Chemical Exile.” As a recent D.C. transplant, I appreciate Rorschach’s apparent dedication to using the full scope of D.C.’s past and present.

After Adams Morgan, chapter three moves to Brookland’s [Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America](#), an oasis of color both natural and manmade. Later chapters happen at the National Mall and Glen Echo Park, Maryland, and more. All locations are accessible by public transportation (to a degree), and Rorschach helpfully recommends nearby locations to check out, which can make treks even more rewarding. The company also provides an at-home version of the story.

Each chapter deepens Teddy’s predicament, while providing enough room for speculation and reflection. It feels like walking through a choose-your-own-adventure book via a great piece of metafiction, like Nabokov’s “Pale Fire” or Byatt’s “Possession.” Faulkner’s famous “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” also comes to mind.

A low-tech form of augmented reality, “Chemical Exile” has me looking at the world a little differently. At the cemetery, I did a double-take after spotting a small St. Anthony’s medal nestled in the grass near my foot, seconds after reading how Teddy packed one for her flight to D.C.

Was this a coincidence, or Teddy’s? The patron saint of lost things returned at, where else, the monastery. While I don’t yet know if this is at all relevant to the story, the experience so far has been a catalyst for such curiosity, stoking a sense of wonder at the world around me. Pro tip: if you can, bring previous chapters to each location in case you want to refer back, especially if you’re taking breaks between chapters.

The seven-chapter subscription plus the in-performance costs about 12 months’ worth of Netflix, but unlike anything on the streaming service, “Chemical Exile” got me far away from my comfy but pacifying couch. With each episode, the world has seemed more mysterious yet explore-able at the same time. I eagerly await each new step. I just have to watch out for the Man in the Blue Jacket.

**Rorscach Theatre:** 1333 H St NE, DC; [rorschachtheatre.com](#) // [@rorschachdc](#)

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