

- REVIEWS

Next to Normal

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FRIDAY 13 NOVEMBER, 2015

There is nothing normal about Next to Normal.



Brendan Hanson, Rachael Beck, and Shannen Alyce in Next to Normal; Photo by Gary Marsh.

Mental Health and mental illness are complicated terms that have been buzzwords for a few years now with good reason. Bringing awareness to this important issue - its causes, effects, treatments and consequences - can only be a good thing.

Next to Normal raises these issues and more.

The plot follows Diana Goodman, loving wife and mother, through a journey of depression, manic and depressive episodes and the rollercoaster that becomes both her and her families lives as her slide into the illness deepens and the effects of medicating and non medicating radiate through the family household and beyond.

Why this was created as a musical is beyond me, let alone a 'Rock Musical'. But again, if this is what it takes to bring an important concern to the forefront, so be it. Art is by definition 'a branch of learning used to invoke discussion and comment', and *Next to Normal* certainly opens discussion.

Rachel Beck is a regular visitor to WA shores and stages, and delivers what Director Adam Mitchell calls 'the Hamlet of female roles' (as the actor has to be able to deliver EVERYTHING) with un-wavering ease: simultaneously dancing, undergoing the trauma of ECT and dealing with next to impossible key changes and musical compositions, guiding the audience to tears or laughter.

Consummate professional Michael Cormick is luminous in the two 'Doctor' roles and relative newcomers Brendan Hanson (Dan) and Joel Horwood (Henry), match Beck and Cormick with their completely Broadway worthy vocals.

Bringing a Broadway Show to Perth is a coup for Black Swan, and the staging and direction is somewhat minimised and modernised for the largely 'Western Suburbs' audience, although several typically American jokes and references fall flat in this setting.

A dining table and chairs are the only setting that remain on stage throughout the entirety of the show, and serve as one of the starkest hints that more is amiss than we originally believe, with seating for four and an (extended) family of five on stage.

So many heart-rending issues are dealt with on top of mental illness: the death of a child, difficulties of marriage, growing up, ethics – it is a lot to pack in to a performance, even if it is almost three hours, and at some points there is so much going on that it feels like one is watching Cirque du Soleil, as sets and people spin in and out of focus and actors are constantly walking – at times unnecessarily as they are trying to stay in the same spot but the floor refuses to stay still. The final ten minutes are a relief as the revolutions stop and one can concentrate solely on the characters and their journey thus far and what their futures look like.

The whole effect is one of New York freneticism, which in its Broadway home was softened with more colourful sets and costumes, but at the Heath Ledger Theatre is heightened by the severe modernisation and darkness of the family home and surroundings, right from the word go.

In the promotional video, the Director states 'What I love about Music theatre is that it has such an emotional engagement, whether you like the tune or not you get it, it goes straight into you, everyone understands music, so there is a much more emotive kind of story telling that we can do in music that you can't do with a regular play.'

Next to Normal is the Winner of three Tony Awards and the 2010 Pulitzer Prize. However, I can't help wishing it had been written as a regular play, as in this depiction especially there wasn't time or room for the complete emotional engagement that the story deserves.

Rating: 3.5 stars out of 5

Next to Normal

Music by Tom Kitt

Book & Lyrics by Brian Yorkey

Directed by Adam Mitchell

Black Swan Theatre Company

State Theatre of Western Australia

Nov 7 – 22, 2015

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victoria has worked on music festivals, theatre and circus shows across the world. She currently resides in Perth, WA.

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