

Fun Home: Wilbury's expertly executed show leaves audiences in awe



Rachael Warren, Paige Barlow, and Shannon Hartman in FUN HOME at The Wilbury Theatre Group; photo by Erin X. Smithers.

Popular Broadway musicals have always classically been about fanfare, big spectacle numbers and broad smiles all around. While there is a place in the canon for the traditional shows of the past, newer shows have paved the way for depth of character, intimate stories and connecting with our emotions. *Fun Home* was originally a graphic novel by Alison Bechdel then turned off-Broadway to Broadway sensation in 2013 and 2015, respectively. In its humble beginnings it was an intimate project for Bechdel telling of her youth as a woman who always knew she was gay. It is the story of her unique father, their relationship, filled with both love and pain, and the things that connect us through generations to our parents. Originally, the form of the graphic novel was seen as a “lesser form” of literature and such subject matter was usually reserved for the pages of long written autobiographies. Breaking the mold is everything *Fun Home* is about and it does so in all the best ways.

In the original Broadway production of this show Alison Bechdel’s adult self is complemented by two other younger actresses portraying her as a young girl and as a college student. The show weaves the three actresses around each other and jumps around Bechdel’s timeline to allow the audience to find parts of the story through the eyes of all her ages. The perspective of each phase is not uncommon in how the mind naturally processes conflict and memory, and who we become because of them. This script, by nature, spills the guts of the protagonist from the very beginning, so it is hard to write too deeply about the show without giving it all away. What is important to know instead is about the people who stage and interpret this biographical masterpiece.

The Wilbury Theatre Group has taken on a bear of a task and produced a show almost indistinguishable from the Broadway iteration. The only major difference is the set, which in this case is smarter and more engaging than the original and is able here to become a character itself. Director Josh Short and assistant director Aaron Blanck take multi-level scaffolding and transport audiences from an old mansion in Pennsylvania, to a college dorm, to a seedy New York apartment. Scenic design by Monica Shinn creates a space that gives the actors the ability to be on set without interrupting the scene they

are recalling in their mind. Picturesque moments are made simply by the presence of all the Alisons watching their life unfold.

The present-day Alison, portrayed by Rachel Warren, watches much of the action from a platform above everyone as she furiously sketches moments in an effort to accurately recall how it all unfolded. Warren, a well-known resident actor from Trinity Repertory Company, fills this lead with power, heart, and beauty. So much of this role comes from just her presence as things happen around her, and Warren's ability to consistently engage and react takes the audience along emotionally with her. One begins to look forward most to the moments when she steps into the light and sings. Her command of all she surveys, the music and her character are masterful and the show feels genuine in her ever-competent grasp.

Arguably the part of the father is as much the lead as Alison. Jason Loete tackles this challenging individual with clear compassion. The struggle in the father's storyline is that he is equal parts brilliant, caring and deeply troubled. The dramatic switches from loving parent to cold, demanding patriarch are sympathetic in Loete's depiction. Even after an unfounded outburst he shows the heart and fury of a man unable to understand his place in his family and how difficult it can be to maintain composure in a stifling world. Loete terrifies and endears audiences with his adept maneuvering through the timelines and strongly props up every musical number he is a part of.

One of the highlights of the show comes from Jennifer Mischley as Alison's mother, Helen. Mrs. Bechdel is the voice of reason and never quite the focus of the action. Yet Mischley finds her moments to shine and, in her one solo, she transforms from familiar housewife to a complex woman looking back on how her life became so unfamiliar and turbulent ("days and days and days, that's how it happens"). In an instant, this character that hadn't factored much into the forefront, becomes the most relatable and tragic of them all. Mischley is poised, stunning, and moving as she shifts the focus briefly to herself and then just as swiftly and adeptly away again.

Remaining are the numerous younger actors and actresses who consistently allow this show to shine. Paige Barlow plays Small Alison in her Wilbury debut. A middle school student from southern Rhode Island, she is no stranger to the stage as she is a member of The Talent Factory's Elite Theatre Company in North Kingstown. The tiniest member of the cast carries so much of the amazing music in this show; Barlow is a powerhouse of energy, talent and musical fortitude. For Alison's college years we meet Joan, her first girlfriend (Daraja Hinds) who draws attention even in the moments she is just passing through. Hinds' strong stage presence makes the attraction to her palpable as Middle Alison (Shannon Hartman) finds her true self through Joan.

This expertly executed show is everything and more that audiences would get from Broadway to a touring company. *Fun Home* is an important contemporary musical that will surely one day be a well-loved part of the historical canon. It is an important piece that will leave audiences in awe and craving to see it again. If given the option to pay hundreds on Broadway or for the talented touring company, one can sit dozens of rows away and still be blown away by the magic. Yet now, we have the option of seeing it locally at a theater that is putting on a show absolutely on par with every other venue where the story has been told.

The Wilbury Theatre Group presents Fun Home, May 23 - June 16. Directed by Josh Short, Music Direction by Tom Chace, choreography by Ali Kenner Brodsky. 40 Sonoma Court, PVD. For tickets and more information, contact 401-400-7100 x0, email : tickets@thewilburygroup.org or visit

www.thewilburygroup.org. This production of *Fun Home* has been recognized by StageSource's 'Standing O' for promoting gender parity in theater.