

***Next to Normal* Handles Mental Illness with Grace and Humor**

At one point in the first act of *Next to Normal*, one character poses the question “Who’s crazy?” Though it seems straightforward enough, this question ends up proving much more complex than it initially appears. Is it really the mother mourning her son who died in infancy by wondering what he might have become? Or could it be her husband who bears the pain of their loss by pretending it never happened? Or perhaps it’s their overachieving teenage daughter who ends up in a pattern of drug abuse.

At the crux of *Next to Normal* is a family coping with the effects of mental illness, a subject that is easy to get wrong, but that here, fortunately, is handled with grace and (where appropriate) humor. With haunting music by Tom Kitt and witty and poignant lyrics by Brian Yorkey, *Next to Normal* hit Broadway in 2010, where it picked up its share of accolades, including the Pulitzer Prize for drama, securing its place in musical theater history among the likes of *Rent* and, later, *Hamilton*. Such is what makes this show an excellent choice for the Brown University Theatre.

Next to Normal features a small cast of seven performers. That said, the set, designed by Renee Surprenant Fitzgerald, emerges as an eighth cast member. Though somewhat unlike the set seen on Broadway or on tour, mostly for practical reasons, it uses space cleverly with a turntable and two levels, while also representing both the false appearance of order the family tries to keep up and the chaos that underlies their lives.

The story centers on Diana Goodman (Temma Schaechter), who suffers from bipolar disorder and delusional episodes – particularly of her son, Gabe (Kyle Brier), who died in infancy, but appears to her at the age he would be if he had lived – and her journey through treatment, which includes medication, hypnosis and eventually electroshock therapy. Schaechter balances the humor and depth, as well as the ferocity and the fragility, of the role beautifully, and her strong vocals shine, particularly in “I Miss the Mountains,” in which Diana decides to go off of her meds. As Gabe, Brier often creeps on behind the set and comes in and out of view, even entering the audience, which speaks to his transcendence of reality in brilliant blocking by director Addie Gorlin. This is added to by Lizzy Callas’ sound design with reverb on his mic. Vocally, Gabe is a notoriously high tenor role, and Brier’s range is not up to the challenge of those high notes, but when he is in his range, he’s strong.

By her side every step of the way is her husband, Dan (Jimmy Damore). In order to hold the household together, Dan denies his own pain and runs for the doctor every time Diana shows a shred of distress. This character, in particular, is a triumph of the musical in that he brings in the intersection of gender and mental illness. As the man of the household, he believes he has to be stoic and steadfast, but in reality, he’s teetering on the edge of a breakdown. Damore showcases this wonderfully, particularly in “I Am the One,” in which Dan tries to remind Diana that he’s always been there for her and assure her that he always will be. And what a voice! His vocals are probably the strongest of the cast.

Meanwhile, their daughter, Natalie (Kayla Kirk), struggles to cope with her family life. She seeks solace in playing classical music on the piano. Enter Henry (Patrick Elizalde) into her practice room at school and into her life, a stoner jazz musician who is infatuated with her. Their relationship mirrors that of Diana and Dan, and this is made particularly clear in “Why Stay/A Promise,” as the blocking of each

couple mimics the other. Rounding out the cast are Diana's doctors, Drs. Fine and Madden (Karis Ryu and Miranda Pla). Both appear professional and well-intentioned. They also appear in Diana's delusions, respectively, as a romantic interest and as a rock star.

Next to Normal definitely has its share of dark moments - it has to be if it's to portray mental illness honestly. There are references to suicide, drug abuse and self-harm, so anyone who is sensitive to these may want to skip this one. That said, ultimately, *Next to Normal* sends a message of hope. The ending isn't necessarily happy, nor is it tragic. Rather, it ends with a sense that things might be okay - if not now, then one day. And that's the reality of mental illness. It's not something that can be cured so much as it is something you learn to live with. The final song, "Light" drives this home, and is perhaps the number one song to seek out when things seem most dark, as the title may suggest. This is the kind of show that will make anyone cry, but it ends on the most uplifting note imaginable, and that, along with the gorgeous music, memorable characters, and humanizing of people with mental illnesses, makes the most heartbreaking moments in the show worth it. As the cast notes, "Day after day, give me clouds and rain and grey. Give me pain if that's what's real - it's the price we pay to feel. The price of love is loss, but still we pay. We love anyway."

Next to Normal runs through Nov 11 at Brown University's Stuart Theatre. For tickets, visit brown.edu/academics/theatre-arts-performance-studies