

Barrington Stage Company, Pittsfield, MA

A New Brain by William Finn and James Lapine

Directed by Joe Calarco.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“I’d rather be sailing. . .

How often does an actor in a minor role in a show get to move up to a leading role in the same musical twenty-five years later? Not often, I’d say, but in the case of William Finn’s fine retelling of the story of his new life, “A New Brain,” that is what has happened to three time Tony Award nominee Mary Testa. Long associated with Finn (starting with his show “In Trousers” in 1979) she played Lisa, the Homeless Lady in the original company, a role taken here by Salome B. Smith who sings it like it was hers alone and felt in the gut and the heart. In this production Testa takes the role originated by Penny Fuller, Gordon Schwinn’s mother Mimi. It is clear from her first notes that she was born to play Mimi Schwinn and the opening night audience in Pittsfield knew it from her first entrance. She was not alone garnering kudos. Adam Chanler-Berat as her son Gordon Schwinn, Darrell Purcell, Jr. as his lover Roger and Smith also received the well-deserved applause of the sold-out house.



Adam Chanler-Berat, Salome B. Smith and Ensemble; Photo: Daniel Rader

Roger was originally played by Christopher Innvar - currently appearing in “Faith Healer” for Barrington Stage Company, and recorded by Norm Lewis. In the new edition he is played by Purcell as a warm, gentle, supportive lover who accepts rejection with the same composure he brings to attending to his partner’s illness, near-death and recovery. He sings the most beautiful

song in the show, “I’d Rather Be Sailing,” early in the show and though he has many other fine opportunities to shine, he blends, instead, into the fabric of the play and remains in our sight but not so much in our minds.



Adam Chanler-Berat & Darrell Purcell, Jr.
Photo: Daniel Rader

His second best moment in the show was in combination with Smith’s homeless woman, “A Really Lousy Day in the Universe.” He also sings the restored song, “Anytime,” to great effect.

Others in the cast have their moments as well. Richard, a night nurse, played by Elisio Román, sings “Poor, Unsuccessful and Fat” and garners the requisite laughs as he tries to give Gordon a sponge-bath.

Dorcas Leung plays Gordon’s “best friend,” Rhoda and proves once again that those we consider to be our closest associates are often not the best friends we could possibly have. The Doctor, played by Tally Sessions is almost too perfect a stereotype. Sessions plays this very well. He also mimes Gordon’s long missing father and is very effective in the role.

Gordon’s employer, children’s television star, Mr. Bungee who plays a frog, is undertaken by Andy Grotelueschen who gives the role a hatefulness that is ideal and perfectly realized. His numerous and sudden appearances are a fine combination of comedy and tragedy. When he softens for a moment and gives the ailing composer sympathy in the song “Don’t Give In,” he, Grotelueschen, turns in a moving performance of the song.

Arteriovenous Malformation is the diagnosis Gordon has to live with; it requires brain surgery and could prove the end of Gordon’s life, a concept he comes to accept. The



Andy Grotelueschen & Adam Chanler-Berat;
Photo: Daniel Rader

coma he ends up in threatens to alter everything for him; it turns his mother into a maniac who has to clean his apartment out of all the things he loves. Adam Chanler-Berat is so solid in the role it is as though he was born to take this part and enliven it for today's audiences. He sings beautifully, moves with all the rigor of a leading man and acts with sincerity and a genuine understanding of who Gordon is and who he needs to become if he lives.

Mary Testa as Mimi is absolutely wonderful justifying her entrance applause at every level. She sings the hell out of every tune she has, emotionally enthralling and a delight to listen to. Her acting of the role is honest and faithful to the show's reality.

Director Joe Calarco has taken Finn's show to new heights aided by Vadim Feichtner directing a fine orchestra. It is impossible to look away from the stage for even a moment. He has engaged his company and they, in turn, engage us to the utmost. Set Designer Paige Hathaway has used the stage dynamically. Jason Lyons, the lighting designer, has coordinated time and space to create realistic symphonies of space. The costumes by Debra Kim Sivigny are nicely suited to the characters. The show's original two acts have been whittled into a single hour and forty minute one act show. It's drive make that a very realistic choice.

This is a special show, emotional, but not overwhelming because you know going into it that its hero has survived to write this play. It still tugs at the heart and pulls out the tears. This company does it justice making it so worth seeing.

+ 08/20/2023 +



Darrell Purcell, Jr., Adam Chanler-Berat, Mary Testa and Dorcas Leung
Photo: Daniel Rader

A New Brain plays at the Boyd-Quinson Stage, 30 Union Street, Pittsfield, MA through September 10. For tickets or information go to barringtonstageco.org or call 413-236-8888.