

Barrington Stage Company, Pittsfield, MA

Nest to Normal, Book and lyrics by **Brian Yorkey**, Music by **Tom Kitt**.

Directed by Alan Paul. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

"I miss the dizzy heights."

Next to Normal is not your normal musical. Not by a long shot. It's not a boy meets girl story and it's not a girl meets boy either. Sort of. It doesn't have a rock score, but it does have a rock-inflected score: loud (sometimes too loud), bouncy and singable. It is rock musical in a fashion. It's a very contemporary story about a psychotic woman and her family. It has an unhappy, hopeful ending it is definitely somewhere next to normal. And I love it! A fascinating production of this show is now on stage at Barrington Stage Company's Boyd-Quinson theater on Union Street in Pittsfield and it next to necessary that you see it. It is director Alan Paul's triumph.



Natalie Joy Johnson, Adante Carter, Joseph Morales; Photo: Daniel Rader

Housewife Diana lives with her husband, Dan, and her daughter, Natalie. and with her son Gabe. This normal family of four has its secrets, of course, and no one more than Diana. She nourishes her secret, keeping it fresh and growing. She has harbored it for years and now it has grown into mammoth proportions. Diana is being played by Natalie Joy Johnson whose blonde hair and subtle good looks give us an image of delicacy that isn't borne out in her performance. Diana is strong-willed, and anything but subtle as she storms her way through life leaving chaos in her wake. Her life is definitely a huge sidestep away from normal, aided and abetted by her

son, Gabe, who revels in being alive, so alive. Adante Carter plays Gabe with a lively sensibility that leaves little doubt about his strength and his influence on his mother. She cannot be alive without him by her side. Carter is strong and influential in the role.

Diana's daughter Natalie is played by Madison McBride. A surly teenager, Natalie is experimenting with boys, drugs and self-abuse having suffered abuse all her life from her mother. At 16 she has a boyfriend named Henry whose good intentions, smothered in marijuana, often fall on deaf ears. This pair of youngsters is 180 degrees from the "Thoroughly Modern Millie" sort of lovers, the more normal images of young people that populate musicals. These teens have grit and fire and strength in their resolves. McBride is a wonder in the role of Natalie. She breathes anger and drops bits of fire in her own path. When she is on stage she is a compelling force who demands to be watched. Ben Clark's Henry is not quite her equal, but his performance is compelling and sweet and demands respect for his good intentions.



Adante Carter, Natalie Joy Johnson;
Photo: Daniel Rader



Madison McBride;
Photo: Daniel Rader.

Once again Alan Paul's vision of the characters in this show comes to the fore and the secondary story of a young relationship takes its moments of precedence seriously. Natalie wants her mother's love and doesn't know how to get it. In a normal musical she would find the way, but here she only comes close.

Gabe and Natalie, brother and sister have no relationship at all, which is only fitting as they've never had a chance to connect. In the final scene of the show where Gabe and his father unite for a furtive moment it would seem that even Natalie might one day have an honest understanding of her brother's power and influence, although that reality is very far from normal. She tells Diana that she doesn't expect to have a normal relationship with her, but that something next to normal would be a fine alternative to their total lack of communication. It is something that Diana may never be capable of having even though she manages to forge connections with her doctors, even if they are awkward ones.



Alan H. Green, Natalie Joy Johnson;
Photo: Daniel Rader.

Those doctors are nicely played by Joseph Morales who does charismatic, as well as analytical, in his roles. When extreme therapy is applied to Diana's case he is there, solid and stalwart. Morales plays it all very nicely.

Dan, Diana's husband, is portrayed by Alan H. Green. This actor can touch you deep in your heart with his singing and his damn-near perfect acting of the role. His fears and his anguish are as pertinent as his devotion and love for both wife and daughter,

though he cannot bring enough of either to satisfy their deep-seated needs. A discussion at intermission over the term "deep-seated" as opposed to "deep-seeded" was prompted by the show and the program and in the case of Dan and Diana both may apply for what has been planted in their relationship sits strong in this show. His devotion, beautifully played by Green, is based on an early vision of Diana that has never wavered. It has bloomed and frozen in time. He is held captive by it and he wants to restore its vigor but he can't. Green is brilliant in this role.

A fascinating physical production serves its characters well as they move from stage to screen and back again. Scenic Designer Wilson Chin and projection designer Nicholas Hussong have created the visual aspects of this show perfectly, compelling the eye and thrilling the heart of the audience. Helen Huang and Becca Janney have costumed the characters ideally. Lighting designer Cory Pattak focuses our attention where it should be, especially in combination with the projections. Angela Steiner conducts an over-amplified orchestra to perfection.

Above all, Alan Paul has created the miraculously difficult world of Dan and Diana with no mistakes in judgement. He presents this unique family play without apologies, without concern for the audience's reactions to it. The result is important entertainment, relevance in a musical world, a close-up of people we may actually know and yet not know very well. This is better than excellent theater. It is on the other side of normal, next to it but beyond it.

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Nest to Normal plays at the Boyd-Quinson Theatre, 30 Union Street, Pittsfield, Massachusetts through September 8. For information and tickets go to barringtonstageco.org or call 413-236-8888