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Songs of soaring sadness - 'Next to Normal'

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Christina Larson Belknap stars as Diana in Some Theatre Company's 'Next to Normal.' (photo courtesy of Some Theatre Company)
Theatre Company presents thoughtful, touching musical

ORONO When considering ways to artistically explore the struggles inherent to mental health issues, musical theater isn't necessarily your first thought. However, Some Theatre Company is presenting a show that does just that.

The Orono-based company offers up 'Next to Normal,' a musical with music by Tom Kitt and book and lyrics by Brian Yorkey, at the Keith Anderson Center in Orono. The production is running through Nov. 13.

It's the story of a family doing its best to overcome the mental health concerns of one of their own, concerns that continue to be exacerbated by a long-ago tragedy from whose shadow none of them can truly escape.

Diana Goodman (Christina Larson Belknap) is a dedicated wife and mother who has struggled for years with her mental health. Her interactions with her family suffer for it she and her husband Dan (Jason Wilkes) have a very hot-and-cold relationship; they can't find comfort due to the lack of predictability in her moods and actions.

There's a distance between her and her overachieving daughter Natalie (Nichole Gabrielle Spartin); despite everything Natalie does, she can never quite gain the attention from her parents that she so desperately craves, so she finds it in a budding romance with an amiable stoner named Henry (Logan Bard).

In truth, the only consistent relationship Diana has is with her son Gabe (Brandon Clark) but that dynamic might be the worst of all - for a particularly sad and unexpected reason.

As Diana searches for a way to deal with her issues, she visits various doctors (Shayne Bither) on her quest for a cure. Sometimes, she finds something that works but only for a little while. And with each relapse, the fall is a little bit harder. Finally, she agrees to a drastic course of action, one that may solve her immediate problem, but might also have far-ranging ramifications that could threaten the very fabric of this already-floundering family...and lead to the most damaging, most final decision of them all.

'Next to Normal' is not your typical musical theater experience. It addresses complexities that are fairly atypical when it comes to the song-and-dance realm. But it works. It works because of a collection of beautifully composed and emotionally powerful songs and a relatively simple narrative that nevertheless manages to be extraordinarily impactful. It is a sincere and honest look at the difficulties of dealing with mental health in crisis both from the outside and from within.

The role of Diana is a bit of a tour de force; Belknap handles it with a sensible, sensitive grace. Even as she flies out of control, Belknap keeps her performance grounded. That honesty is key to Diana's relatability she

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gives us a portrait of struggle that is all too familiar to many of us. Wilkes charms as the steadfast and exasperated Dan he radiates genuine affection while still maintaining a sad remove that is, at times, heartbreaking.

Sparlin manages to create a manufactured type-A in Natalie equal parts bright and brittle. This is a girl who's always at 10; not because she wants to be, but because it's the only path to love and acceptance that she can see. Logan Bard's Henry flashes sweet smiles and an underlying gentleness in his interactions, a classic good guy. The interplay between him and Sparlin is lovely to watch. Bither does yeoman's work in crafting different-but-the-same takes on the doctors, pointing up the baseline similarities that any long-suffering patient is likely to see among specialists all while making each man unique.

And Clark is an ideally jarring presence; sometimes, Gabe is mostly in the shadows, while at other times, he is front and center with an intense bravado. Those moments are good, but he's at his best when he's seamlessly transitioning from one to the other.

Director Elaine Bard brings an infectious energy and focus to the helm. She demonstrates a good understanding of the how and why of this admittedly-difficult show's many tonal shifts; there's a smoothness to it that was likely hard-won. Belknap and Wilkes also serve as the show's musical directors, doing a fine job of capturing the many emotionally-charged musical moments; Erryn Bard manages the choreography. Sparlin also pulls double duty her set design does a wonderful job of overcoming some of the space's inherent limitations while Gerry Bard's lighting work finishes the job of defining and redefining the space.

'Next to Normal' is a beautifully sad piece of work, the sort of show that challenges both artists and audiences alike. It is touching and powerful and well worth a look.

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