



Chasing Normal



CAST Theater tackles mental illness, heartbreak and redemption

By PATRICK MULVIHILL
News staff writer

CAST Theater's summer play is anything but ordinary — "Next to Normal" covers the dark terrain of mental disorder and family dysfunction, but treads with humor and tenderness.

The musical opens at the Columbia Center for the Arts Friday.

Director Mark Steighner described that play as "not purely escapist fantasy, but rooted in reality."

"I chose 'Next to Normal' for a number of reasons: it is an extremely well written piece with interesting, varied music and a theme to which nearly everyone can relate, which is that behind the facade of normalcy, every family has challenges and there is no 'normal,'" said Steighner.

"Next to Normal," with story and lyrics by Brian Yorkey and music by Tom Kitt, won three TONY Awards in 2009, including Best Musical Score and the 2010 Pulitzer Prize. It was also chosen as "one of the year's ten best shows" by critics around the country, including The Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, Rolling Stone and The New York Times.

At six members, the cast is small. The staging and costume design are fairly minimal, mirroring a typical suburban setting.

"It is physically and conceptually a good fit for the Columbia Center Theatre, which is challenging when trying to stage large scale musicals," said Steighner.

Despite its small physical scope, Yorkey's play is emotionally complex. It juggles playful humor with biting commentaries on family dysfunction, and the inability of the mainstream health industry to offer a remedy. Emily Vawter plays Diana Goodman, a

stay-at-home mom whose best friend is her medicine cabinet — she has been struggling with bipolar disorder for 16 years, and even the act of making sandwiches for breakfast is a battle.

Peter Tappert plays her husband, Dan, whose intentions are good, but are dwarfed by the challenges his family faces.

"Although the subject matter is serious, it is handled with a great deal of humor," said Steighner. "It's not that the writers make light of mental illness, but that they show characters dealing with their challenges with a sense of irony and humor, the way many people do."

Music is crucial to the production, and runs continuously throughout — often when characters are speaking, as an undercurrent. Actors will be mic'd up, singing over a live five-piece band which includes a cello, electric guitar, bass, drums and piano.

Steighner said the musical has been described as a "rock opera," but he feels that title is inaccurate. The play blends influences of rock, pop and traditional stage tunes, but it tells its story with large portions of dialogue as well as song.

The play is no easy undertaking, but Steighner described the cast as "hard-working" and "totally dedicated to making the show a success."

"For me, it has been fun working with a small cast for a change, especially a cast of generally experienced actors who know how to do their own research and character work," said Steighner.

The play opens at 7:30 p.m. Friday at 215 Cascade Ave in downtown Hood River. For more information, go to www.columbiaarts.org/performances/next-to-normal.

OUT OF BODY describes Diana Goodman's (Emily Vawter) frame of mind as she sings from a raised stage overlooking her own medical operation. Dr. Madden (Joe Garoutte) and his assistant (Duncan Krummel) check her vital signs. At right, Gabe Goodman haunts his mother while his sister, Natalie (Arianna Bloodgood) comforts her. Bottom right, the cast sings the finale song, "Light," about finding solace amid life's extremes. "Sons and daughters, husbands, wives ... can fight that fight. There will be light," sings the cast.



Photos by Patrick Mulvihill



TICKETS AND TIMES

"Next to Normal," by Brian Yorkey and Tom Kitt; directed by Mark Steighner. Shows are July 10, 11, 17, 18, 23, 24, and 25 at 7:30 p.m.; July 19 at 2 p.m.

Tickets: \$18 for adults, \$15 for students and seniors 62+, and \$12 for groups of 10 or more.

Tickets are available online below, at Waucoma Bookstore, and in the gallery at Columbia Center for the Arts, 215 Cascade Ave in downtown Hood River.



DIANA AND DAN, husband and wife, work together to recover memories Diana lost after an operation. Right, a five-piece band lead by director Mark Steighner provides the score and accompaniment for the musical. The songs blend elements of rock, pop and traditional stage tunes.