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DARLEEN ORTEGA



PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM/OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival's premiere production of 'Family Album,' a rock musical that tackles the struggles for authentic expression in art and relationships. Pictured, from left, are Luqman Brown, Christian Gibbs, Vinnie Sperrazza, Lawrence Stallings, and Casey Scott.

# Family Album

Rock musical brings outsider voices to art and relationships

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

If you like your musicals upbeat and buoyant, with a linear plot trajectory, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's world premiere production of "Family Album" may be a stretch. It's messy, feels a little rough in spots, and grapples with some big themes in a very nonlinear way. But if you can set aside your typical expectations

and simply go on the ride where this production takes you, it is a ride worth taking.

OSF commissioned this work from Stew and Heidi Rodewald, whose prior musical, "Passing Strange," garnered critical acclaim. They are rock musicians with an ear for popular culture and outsider voices, and theater could use a lot more attention to voices that don't enjoy dominant culture privilege.

One thing I have learned to love about people who feel themselves to be outsiders (having regular occasions to walk in those shoes myself), they often don't feel constrained to follow the unwritten rules

for whatever setting or genre they have landed in. Perhaps those rules don't fit the stories they want to tell -- or perhaps they don't know they are violating any rules. I make a practice of listening to the stories of people who feel themselves to be outsiders and sometimes it can be disorienting and challenging. What are they trying to say? Is there a point here somewhere? Often there is a period of confusion or even irritation before I realize -- surprisingly often -- that this person has something to teach me, and the circuitous journey may well have been as important as the destination.

I thought of such conversations while experiencing "Family Album." It takes a while to wind-up. The cast members are all stretching beyond their comfort zones, either because they are musicians with

little theater experience or actors with some uneasiness about performing in this rock-musical setting. No one is exactly in his or her wheelhouse. The story isn't overly complex -- a band led by aging rockers is about to play a major gig as the opening act to a popular young group in Madison Square Garden and stops in to crash at the posh Brooklyn home of two former bandmates who have found more conventional financial success, which rekindles old loves and old rivalries and big questions about the trade-offs of different kinds of success. But though the music is crisp and the cast is talented, the plot meanders and I occasionally wondered what edges we were walking and why.

But the payoffs did come. I found my-

*continued* ▼ on page 16