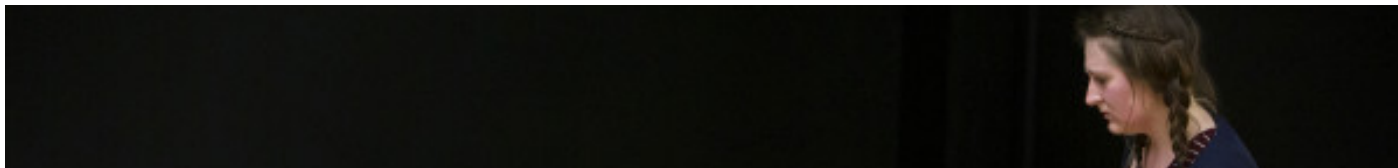


Performing Arts

Cast shines light on impact of mental illness in rock musical ‘Next to Normal’





Ashley L. Conti | BDN

Jason Wilkes (center), as Dan, looks to Nichole Sparlin (right), as Natalie, while running a scene with Christina Belknap, as Diana, during dress rehearsal of Some Theatre Company's upcoming production of "Next to Normal" at Keith Anderson Community Center in Orono.

By **Judy Harrison**, BDN Staff • November 9, 2016 2:38 pm
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Mental illness, unresolved grief, teenage angst and the dark soul of suburban life hardly seem like they could or should be fodder for a rock musical.

Yet all are explored in “Next to Normal,” which is being presented this weekend by Orono-based **Some Theatre Company** at the Keith Anderson Community Center. The production is funny, moving and thought provoking with

production numbers titled, “My Psychopharmacologist and I,” “I Miss the Mountains,” and “Aftershocks.”

“Next to Normal,” with music by Tom Kitt and book and lyrics by Brian Yorkey, won three Tony Awards and the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for drama. The play tells the story of how the Goodman family is impacted by and deals with mother Diana’s bipolar disorder.

Director Elaine Bard cast the show well with Christina Larson Belknap as Diana, Jason Wilkes as her devoted husband Dan, Brandon Clark as their son Gabe, Nichole Gabrielle Sparlin, who also designed the set, as their daughter Natalie, Logan Bard as her boyfriend, Henry, and Shayne Bither, who portrays Diana’s doctors.

Although their voices aren't always able to reach every note of the show's complex score, the cast, for the most part captures the emotional roller coaster it depicts. Bard also uses the set well so the show never seems static in terms of movement.

Belknap and Wilkes work beautifully together. She consistently allows Diana's strength to shine through the illness despite its allure. He wears Dan's dutiful weariness like a worn but comfortable flannel shirt. At times, Belknap and Wilkes appear to be waltzing together and around each other rather than acting in perfectly well-timed performances.

Clark is mesmerizing as the Goodman's son, Gabe. The character at times seems to represent Diana's disease. Clark is so charming in the role that it is

easy to understand the hold it has over her. As the character sings “I’m Alive,” he is the pulsing heart of the show.

If Clark is the heart, Sparlin is the dark soul of the show. Her justifiably angry teen runs back and forth along a tightrope without a safety net. At one end, she she see herself becoming her mother with a mind mired in illness. At the other, is a tiny speck of light that offers some hope that she can shake free of the hold the illness has held her and her family in for all her life. She gives an insightful and nuanced performance.

Sparlin’s multilayered set uses platforms to bring the suburban Goodman’s home out into the audience. While it works well in the community center’s space, the house seems a little too sparse, a little too tidy to be occupied by a family so cluttered with emotional baggage.

Bard uses recorded music rather than musicians. It works in the center's intimate space but some of the musical subtleties are lost.

“Next to Normal” challenges the performers and the audience. Under Bard’s leadership the cast and crew illuminate all the dark corners of the Goodman family and prove that being “next to normal” is pretty normal.

“Next to Normal” will be performed at 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday and at 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, at the Keith Anderson Community Center at 19 Bennoch Road, Orono. Tickets are \$20 for general admission, with \$10 student rush tickets available on the day of the show. There are also a select number of \$55 partially tax-deductible VIP Patron of the Arts tickets, which includes preferred seating, refreshments and recognition in the playbill and online.

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