

Cultural Daily

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The Prom Unabashedly Embraces Gay & Show-Biz Culture

David Sheward · Wednesday, November 21st, 2018

“We’re liberal Democrats from Broadway,” defiantly proclaims the amazing Brooks Ashmanskas as Barry Glickman, an egotistical musical-comedy star, to the astonished and unsuspecting PTA of a tiny Indiana town in the unabashedly left-leaning new musical *The Prom*. The line draws applause from the theater-loving audience at the Longacre Theater and sets the tone for this joyous celebration of all things fabulous and splashy. The show reeks of show-biz savvy and unapologetically endorses queer culture (“I’m as gay as a bucket of wigs,” Barry states) as well as a love of the musical genre. But it’s also a tender teen love story and an earnest plea not just for tolerance but acceptance. Every element is polished with professionalism and skillfully combines satire and verisimilitude for a slightly twisted perspective on our divided America. If that sounds too serious, don’t be scared off. *The Prom* is one of the funniest shows to hit Broadway in years.



Josh Lamon, Beth Leavel, Brooks Ashmanskas, and Angie Schworer in *The Prom*.

Credit: Deen van Meer

Fresh from a one-night flop tuner called *Eleanor: The Eleanor Roosevelt Musical* and dismissed as “aging narcissists,” Barry and four of his colleagues descend on the Midwestern hamlet of Edgewater where the sacred titular high-school dance has been cancelled because Emma, a lesbian student wants to attend with her female date. The glittery actors are in search of publicity so they can still love themselves “but appear to be decent human beings.” The New York retinue also includes divine diva Dee Dee Allen (spectacular Beth Leavel), pretentious Juilliard grad Trent Oliver (razor-sharp Christopher Siber), chorine Angie (gorgeous and leggy Angie Schworer), and whiny PR agent Sheldon Saperstein (funny Josh Lamon). Each of these dazzling headliners as well as the agile, flamboyant Ashmanskas delivers a Tony-caliber performance, but they are matched by Caitlin Kinnunen’s raw emotion and powerful voice as the beleaguered Emma.



Angie Schworer and Caitlin Kinnunen in *The Prom*.

Credit: Deen van Meer

Isabelle McCalla also plucks at heartstrings as Alyssa, Emma’s secret girlfriend. Naturally she is the daughter of the bigoted head of the anti-gay faction of the PTA (Courtney Collins who works miracles with this thankless role). Michael Potts brings a dry sense of humor to the role of the principal who, in another convenient plot twist, just happens to be a huge fan of Dee Dee’s and provides a love interest for her. My only quarrel with the casting is the age of the chorus members, all of whom are fantastic singers and dancers. But they’re supposed to be in high school and the

majority of them look like they're working on their second or third masters degrees.

The hilarious book by Bob Martin of *The Drowsy Chaperone* and Chad Beguelin of *Aladdin* and *The Wedding Singer* is a feast of insider theater jokes but novices will laugh too. It also doesn't condescend and assumes we know a thing or two about the world around us. Where else are we going to get effective gags about the electoral college, Judy Woodruff, PBS, and federal government versus local autonomy. The music by Matthew Sklar is zesty, memorable, and not derived from other sources while Beguelin's intricate lyrics actually rhyme and have wit. In one of her big numbers, "It's Not About Me," Dee Dee chastises the Indiana community for ostracizing Emma "who is an LGBTQ teen/I've been far too angry to Google what those letters mean."

Director-choreographer Casey Nicholaw (*The Book of Mormon*) creates rapid-fire staging and dances reflecting parodies of Broadway icons like Bob Fosse as well as the midwestern teens' version of contemporary hip-hop. Scott Pask's sets are colorful and comic as are the jokey costumes by Ann Roth and Matthew Pachtman. Oh, and one more point—this is an original concept, not based on a movie, play or the career of a rock, pop, or R&B legend. How refreshing.

Opened Nov. 15 for an open run. Longacre Theatre, 220 W. 48th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. \$59-\$179. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

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