

# Cultural Daily

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## Benny & Joon: Destination Theater

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, November 1st, 2017

As a theater buff who will travel for outstanding live theater, the Old Globe is quickly becoming (for me) a destination theater venue.

This weekend, I saw their original musical production of *Benny & Joon*, which is based on the 1993 movie starring Johnny Depp, Aidan Quinn and Mary Stuart Masterson. I had a vague recollection of the movie, but was intrigued enough to make the trek from Los Angeles to San Diego to see how they adapted this story about siblings dealing with love, loss and mental illness. I was pleasantly surprised to find this original production captured the magic of the movie as well as the subtle intricacies of a family grappling with mental illness.

Having two mentally ill brothers of my own, I found this depiction honest and emotionally resonant. The four central characters are well-crafted with distinct voices, each bringing something essential to the story. And to this production's credit, the actors are expertly cast, with the vocal chops and the dramatic (and comedic) chops to deliver the goods. As Benny, Joon's put-upon caretaker brother, Andrew Samonsky carries the weight of responsibility on his shoulders that has kept him from truly embracing his own life.

As Benny's mentally-ill sister Joon, Hanna Elless renders a compelling and multi-faceted performance and captures the mercurial nature of a woman trying to live her life on her terms despite the straitjacket of mental illness which derails her ability to do so. Into this dysfunctional and co-dependent dynamic enters Sam – played with childlike innocence by Bryce Pinkham – who channels his inner Buster Keaton as a sweetly eccentric, good-hearted oddball who possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of movie dialogue which helps him navigate his way through life. Desperate to secure reliable help watching Joon, Benny winds up on the losing end of a poker game and takes in Sam who agrees to oversee Joon until Benny can find another caretaker.



(from left) January LaVoy as Ruthie, Andrew Samonsky as Benny, Bryce Pinkham as Sam, and Hannah Elless as Joon in *Benny & Joon*.

What he didn't count on would be how quickly these two misfits find solace in each other. Rounding out the quartet is Ruthie, an actress-turned waitress who meets cute with Benny at his mechanic shop. Ruthie, played with an earthy verve by Jennifer Savoy, brings much-needed romance into Benny's life. The two love interests (Joon & Sam, and Benny & Ruthie) develop in

tandem, but Benny is oblivious to the bond developing between Sam and Joon. But just as things start heating up between Benny and Ruthie, Benny puts on the brakes, reverting to the safe life choices that have kept him isolated.

It's to these actors' credit that the nuanced relationships are grounded and believable. While the first act struggles a bit to lay the groundwork of these disparate lives being drawn together, it's the second act which really delves deeper into the core issues and allows the psychological and socially-challenged lovers (Joon and Sam) to transcend their limitations and come into their own. From here, the musical really takes off, earning the standing ovation that brought the audience to its feet.

Much like the whimsical appeal of the screen-to-stage adaptation of *Amelie* which found its way to Broadway this past year, *Benny & Joon* succeeds where *Amelie* fell short, giving its eccentric misfits strong 2nd act character arcs which could give *Benny & Joon* more staying power if it finds its way to the Great White Way.

*Top: Hannah Elless as Joon and Bryce Pinkham as Sam in Benny & Joon, book by Kirsten Guenther, music by Nolan Gasser, lyrics by Mindi Dickstein, directed by Jack Cummings III, running September 7 – October 22, 2017 at The Old Globe. Photo by Jim Cox.*

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