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Dear Evan Hansen Offers a Poignant and Timely Musical for Our Times

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, January 9th, 2019

When *Dear Evan Hansen* first opened on Broadway in December 2016, the unassuming musical about the now iconic high schooler with his arm in a cast and a catchy score became a surprise hit. The show's fresh-faced lyricists Benj Pasek and Justin Paul were relative unknowns. But all that has changed dramatically.

Together with Steven Levenson, who wrote the book for the musical, they tapped into the zeitgeist and struck a nerve with teenagers and adults alike with a story that found a way to take on social anxiety and teen suicide and turn it into a hit show with a powerful message for our social media-saturated times. A year after the groundbreaking juggernaut that was *Hamilton* swept the Tony Awards, this intimate tearjerker of a musical left its own impact, winning eight Tonys, including Best Musical, Best Score, Best Book and Best Actor for Ben Platt (as the titular Evan Hansen).

Touring productions don't always capture the magic of the original Broadway cast, but the current touring production of *Dear Evan Hansen* that opened at the Segerstrom Center for Arts (playing now through January 13th) feels just as vital and relevant as the Broadway production. Platt left some mighty big shoes (and orthopedic cast) to fill. Having seen the Broadway production, I can attest that Ben Levi Ross fills those shoes quite nicely, as do the rest of the talented cast. Ross's rail thin physicality frames his fragility and vulnerability, making it all the more disarming when he delivers the full-throated vocals from a complex and demanding score which frequently requires a jangle of conflicting emotions that can devolve into tears at any given moment. Pasek and Paul deliver a well-crafted score with songs that advance the story and convey the theme with a contemporary pop sound. The three that resonate most and leave a lasting imprint are "Waving Through a Window," "For Forever" and "You Will Be Found."



The plot hinges on a daily exercise from Evan's (never seen) psychologist to write himself a daily letter, a positive affirmation that "today is going to be a good day and here's why." One such letter finds its way into the hands of a troubled loner classmate of Evan's named Connor Murphy. We learn of Connor's suicide when his parents track down Evan. They found the letter addressed to Evan among their son's belongings and jump to the mistaken conclusion that Evan may have been the sole individual their son felt a bond with. Evan initially tries to correct their impression, but succumbs to their thirst for answers and fabricates a friendship (with their son) that never existed, filling a void that needs to be filled. The wrinkle in all of this and a likely driving force in Evan's

quest to win them over is the fact that Evan has a mad crush on Connor's sister Zoe. Zoe bristles at the alternative reality that Evan paints of her brother's redeeming qualities.

If the story sounds a bit contrived, it plays out quite nicely and escalates exponentially as the school gets wind of Evan's supposed friendship with the boy who took his life, turning Evan into a reluctant hero and poster child for reaching out to fellow classmates who are isolated. The lie grows with the help of two of Evan's classmates, Jared Kleinman and Alana Beck, played to comedic effect by Jared Goldsmith and Phoebe Koyabe respectively. Jared alone knows the extent of Evan's deception and agrees to create a fake email account to substantiate Evan's supposed friendship with Connor.

Like that other Tony winning musical about suicide, *Fun Home*, *Dear Evan Hansen* treats suicide in a way that feels authentic and nuanced and doesn't wallow in cliché. The surviving members of Connor's family are allowed to grieve (or not grieve) in different measure. Their inner turmoil is captured achingly in the song "Requiem." Maggie McKenna, as Connor's sister Zoe and the object of Evan's affection, mines the anger and resentment of someone who was tormented by her brother and refuses to pretend otherwise. Jessica Phillips hits all the right notes as Evan's hardworking mom (Heidi) who's doing her damndest to help her son overcome his anxiety but can't shake the feeling that she's falling short. Infused with dimension and depth, Heidi is a role that any stressed-out single mother would be hard-pressed not to identify with. As Evan's sole guardian, hers is perhaps the most crucial role besides Evan himself, because it's through their relationship that Evan's predicament is most vivid. Phillips' vocals are spot on and her emotional dilemma as a parent struggling to help her son who's keeping her at arm's length is palpable and believable. When she finally explodes in frustration during the pivotal mother-son blowout, it's a powerful heartbreaking moment.

The most tangible benefit of Evan's white lie is his burgeoning relationship with Zoe. In the song "If I Could Tell Her," songwriters Pasek and Paul found a clever and touching way for Evan to express his feelings for Zoe by framing it from her (deceased) brother's point of view. Evan shares all the little things her brother noticed and appreciated about Zoe (like the way she smiles). The fact that Connor never actually said any of these things is eclipsed by the impact Evan's words have on Zoe. It's cathartic and healing, and it brings Evan and Zoe closer. In time, Evan starts spending more and more time with the Murphy's who come to look on him as a member of the family. Evan meanwhile has deliberately kept his mother in the dark, telling her he's spending the night at his friend Jared's whenever she asks. It's only when the Murphy's invite Evan's mom to dinner that the extent of her son's involvement with this other family becomes evident. When Connor's parents announce their plans to give Evan the money they've set aside for their son's college tuition, Heidi feels completely blindsided that she's lost her son to this family she barely knows. Marrick Smith (as Connor Murphy) gives a strong performance, turning in a menacing presence while alive and a slightly less menacing presence when he returns posthumously for some engaging duets with Evan and Jared. My only beef with Smith's casting is that I didn't quite buy him as a teenager. I suppose the point could be made that there are teens whose brooding makes them appear older than their peers (like Judd Nelson in *The Breakfast Club*), but that's a small quibble in an otherwise strong performance.

It's interesting to revisit the musical for a second time after a two-year stretch. In these politically tumultuous times when the line between truth and lies is consistently and deliberately being blurred and often obliterated, the act of exposing and calling out the lie is more important than ever. Which is finally the step Evan is forced to take. It's an important lesson about taking responsibility for

one's actions and making things right. The message of hope and the notion that we are all connected has clearly resonated with audiences, and that's something worth celebrating.

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