Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

FUN HOME, a cartoonist life

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, March 1st, 2017

I attended the Los Angeles premiere of the exciting musical *Fun Home* at the Ahmanson (February 21-April 1), based on the graphic memoir by cartoonist Alison Bechdel. The 2012 play by composer Jeanine Tesori and lyricist Lisa Kron had won 5 Tony awards out of 12 nominations after it opened on Broadway at Circle in the Square in 2015, and now I could see why.

Alessandra Baldacchino, Pierson Salvador, Lennon Nate Hammond. Fun Home©Joan Marcus-CTG

The audience cheered enthusiastically at the musical number where the three children, Alison and her younger brothers John and Christian, dance on a coffin at their family's funeral parlor, that they nicknamed "fun home." I found especially funny and moving the scene where a teenage Alison (Abby Corrigan), away from home at college, suddenly realizes she is gay, and falls into bed with her first lover Joan (Karen Eilbacher), after they both confess to having had crushes on their first-grade teachers.

Kate Shindle as Alison in Fun Home ©Joan Marcus-CTG

Alison Bechdel is well known for her long-running comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008) about the lives and loves of her politically active lesbian friends. This is where the "Bechdel Test" originated in 1985. It asks whether a movie features at least two women who talk to each other about something besides a man. This idea was inspired by Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own.*

Bechdel said that she wrote her autobiographical novel Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic (2006), about her father Bruce, a closeted bi-sexual man, who was hit by a truck and died at age 44, because "it's such a vivid example of the impact of homophobia on an actual family. The deeper story is how my father taught me to be an artist." An English teacher her father taught his daughter to love books by writers such as James Joyce and Colette.

Bechdel then wrote *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* (2012) about the relationship with her Catholic mother Helen, a theater actress in her small Pennsylvania town. As the author is undergoing psychoanalysis, she interweaves quotes from Sigmund Freud's and Donald Winnicott's theories, as well as Adrienne Rich's and Virginia Woolf's writings.

The cartoonist was stunned at how the two women who wrote the musical Fun Home "seemed to be able to see the emotions of the story more clearly than I could. They captured the essence of my book." In 2014 she wrote in a strip "Fun Home! The Musical!" for a local paper in Vermont where she lives: "My parents, who met in a play, would go on living in one." In a 2015 strip "Play Therapy" she said about her deceased parents: "My impossible wish is that the play can heal them too."

After 25 years Bechdel had stopped writing her strip in 2008, at the end the George W. Bush administration, but when Donald Trump was elected President, she felt the need to comment with a strip on her Facebook blog: "Same as it ever was, only much worse."

In this time of divisiveness, we suggest reading *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (2008) for an inside look at the world of Gay, Lesbian, Homosexual, Bisexual, Butch, Femme, Queer, Transgender people in America during the past 35 years through the perceptive drawings and writings by Alison Bechdel.

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