

Cultural Daily

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In Fun Home, Fun is Where You Hide It

Sylvie · Wednesday, March 1st, 2017

Psychology 101 instructs us that transparency purifies. But how boring is that? Never boring in the hands of Alison Bechdel, whose best-selling graphic memoir *Fun Home* morphed into the award-winning musical now at the Ahmanson Theatre. *Fun Home* arrived in Los Angeles fortified by powerful accolades and five 2015 Tony Awards, including Best Musical. So there was plenty of reason to trust at least some of the hype.

It took Lisa Kron (book and lyrics) and Jeanine Tesori (music) five years to take apart, reconstruct and refine Bechdel's autobiographical work, which was hardly what you'd call a natural fit for a musical. But they worked at it and worked at it, eventually transforming it into something of a cross between a play with music and a subtle psychological thriller with humor. It fits no category, because what it delivers is an affecting portrait of a conflicted family locked in an intricate amalgam of song, suspicion, dance, deceit, playfulness, pain and secrets that are never far from the troubled surface of this family's unresolved relationships.

The brilliantly complicated result is incisive and entirely unexpected. Many plays have been built around things left unsaid, actions unconfessed, guilts real or perceived. But a musical? Yes. A new and entirely unconventional musical with, reportedly for the first time, a lesbian protagonist.

None of this keeps *Fun Home* from being a rigorous examination of a family in crisis, in which the father's homosexual proclivity is the elephant in the room. Bruce the Dad (a fine Robert Petkoff) is a beloved high school teacher who runs a Funeral Home on the side — the "Fun" Home of the title, as nicknamed by his offspring. But Bruce also is a tyrannical perfectionist who loves restoring old houses and harbors an obsession with order, maintenance, shining and polishing the "things" he has collected over the years that are at once his refuge and escape.



Susan Moniz in *Fun Home* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

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His wife Helen (a beautifully modulated Susan Moniz, who has the musical's top heartbreaking number) knows the truth about her husband's sexuality, but long ago chose to keep silent, guaranteeing that, in the absence of any real acknowledgment, denial would fester and infect the atmosphere. The three young children — Alison, John and Christian — are left in a darkness consumed by innuendo that ends only when Bruce (accidentally?) steps in front of an oncoming

truck.

What is surprising about the show — and takes some getting used to — is the complexity not only of the family dynamics, but of a staging by Sam Gold that reflects these convolutions. A kind of mild and permanent restlessness reigns, from the construct of different, often cluttered playing areas (David Zinn designed the busy set), to jumpy lighting by Ben Stanton that shifts as uneasily as Bruce's moods, to the nuances of Tesori's music —from sad to playful to vibrant, delivered by an orchestra that sits upstage.



Robert Petkoff and Kate Shindle in *Fun Home* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

Significantly, we also are asked to deal with not one, but three Alisons — the child (Alessandra Baldacchino), the adolescent (Abby Corrigan) and the adult (Kate Shindle) — who share the stage *simultaneously* throughout the show. Since Alison is the pivot of our story, the daughter (and novelist Bechdel stand-in) who has to deal with her own burgeoning lesbianism, this ensures that there is plenty there for an audience to sort out.



Abby Corrigan in *Fun Home* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

And yet it works in its own mystifying, deliberate and disordered order. The hyperactivity mirrors the mixed messages that secrets and lies communicate within the family, and the brilliance of it all is how this confusion only heightens the subterfuge of normalcy perpetrated by the parents. Until, of course, the bubble bursts.

Petkoff is a strong Bruce, both driven and tormented by his double life. Baldacchino as Small Alison has the most direct and quizzical interactions with her Dad and carries them off impressively. Corrigan is just awkward and lanky enough for college-age Alison, while Shindle remains the most detached Alison of the lot — intentionally so, as she is also the adult observer of this passing pageant of her life.

But it is Moniz as Bruce's wife Helen who is the most intriguing creation in *Fun Home*, a shadow presence as the depth of her unhappiness is revealed not in words, but in her nervousness, sharp reactions and morose demeanor — until her big number and, even then, only indirectly, in a lament that turns angry about shining and polishing for “days and days and days and days and days and days...” (Oddly, no song titles are included in the program.)



Kate Shindle and Robert Petkoff in *Fun Home* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

Gold's staging neither falters nor tries to soften the truths that are revealed, teaspoonful by teaspoonful, making *Fun Home* a miracle of subtlety and muddle. This is a musical where you have to pay close attention. Its triumph is that you want to and can.

Top image: Alessandra Baldacchino as Small Alison, playing airplane with her Dad (Robert Petkoff, on the floor).

Photos by Joan Marcus

WHAT: *Fun Home*

WHERE: Ahmanson Theatre, 135 N. Grand Ave, Los Angeles 90012

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays 2 & 8pm; Sundays 1 & 6:30pm. Through April 1.
Added performances: Monday, March 27, 8pm, and Thursday, March 3, 2pm.

HOW: Tickets: \$25–\$125 (subject to change) available online at CenterTheatreGroup.org, by phone at (213) 972-4400 or in person at the Ahmanson Box Office. Groups: (213) 972-7231.

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