Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Musical Look At Scourges of Our Time

Sylvie · Wednesday, October 24th, 2018

Sitting through the opening night of *Dear Evan Hansen* at The Ahmanson Theatre last Friday, lines from another musical began to run through my mind: "*The concerts you enjoy together/Neighbors you annoy together/**Children you destroy together**…*"

Yes, those are from *Company*, Stephen Sondheim's 1970 musical, now almost 50 years old, yet still one of the most deft and perceptive of his many deft and perceptive musicals. It won six Tonys — the same as *Evan Hansen* — and was as topical in its time as *Evan Hansen* is today. But all comparisons stop there. They are very different works, each, to their credit, spawned by the dominant trends and social issues of their generation.

Dear Evan Hansen is the product of a far more chaotic world, upended in countless ways by social media and the Internet. Its stumbling, tongue-tied, heartrending response is to a tragic scourge of social isolation, anxiety and depression among America's teens, accompanied by low self-esteem, anger and even suicide. *Evan Hansen*'s songs are about The Outsider yearning to come in ("Waving Through a Window") and the clueless plight of so many adults, juggling to understand, to keep going and to find ways to still be good parents ("Anybody Have a Map?")

l-r, Ben Levi Ross, Aaron Lazar, Christiane Noll & Maggie McKenna in *Dear Evan Hansen* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

When we meet Evan (a beautifully rendered performance by Ben Levi Ross, a talented and thoroughly engaging L.A. native son), he seems much like any other mildly moody teenager who is alone more than he likes, takes meds and is in therapy to fight a deep sense of alienation. His parents are divorced. Dad is AWOL with a new family in Colorado, and single Mom Heidi (the excellent Jessica Phillips) struggles as a nurse's aide by day, a paralegal student by night, and a 24/7 parent who worries about not being around enough to do right by Evan.

Connor Murphy (Marrick Smith), one of Evan's nastiest and most dysfunctional classmates, snatches an email letter out of the school printer that was intended as a therapeutic message from Evan to himself. It is found in Connor's possession when Connor commits suicide and is instantly misinterpreted as a letter from him to Evan. This lets loose a cycle of small lies that turn into larger misunderstandings that take on a runaway life of their own.

Evan, who is attracted to Connor's sister Zoe (a lovely Maggie McKenna), had made an affectionate reference to her in this letter. That only deepens the mystery of nice-guy Connor, since

Connor hated his sister. The Murphy parents, Larry (Aaron Lazar) and Cynthia (Christiane Noll) cling to the shred of hope that perhaps their awful son might have been a nicer guy than they thought.

l-r, Christiane Noll & Jessica Phillips in *Dear Evan Hansen* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

Evan's friends, Jared (Jared Goldsmith) and the super-efficient Alana (Phoebe Koyabe), complicate everything by working to turn the myth of a wonderful Connor into a social media movement. The more Evan tries to worm out from under this growing mountain of lies, the worse it gets — until he can't stand it any longer and it all unravels.

Because this musical has the gumption to address three prominent contemporary issues — teen depression, confused parenting, aggravated by the ever-prevalent social media — the production's shortcomings have been more easily forgiven in favor of its larger message.

This does not mean that the long first act is not redundant or that the insistent repetition of the songs and sheer amount of technical wizardry that overwhelms it (making a comment of its own) could not do with Less instead of all that More. But *Evan Hansen* has come to Los Angeles as a fully formed Huge Hit, so arguing with its success is arguing to change our orbit around the sun.

The musical's first half is devoted to setting up the lengthy exposition, with a lot of undramatic exchanges among the characters by text and email, while the human drama — always the point — only catches fire in the second half.

Ben Levi Ross & Jessica Phillips in *Dear Evan Hansen* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

All of which makes *Dear Evan Hansen* a tall order of a musical.

Just as *Next To Normal* (2009) broke down our preconceptions about musicals by focusing on bipolar disorder, and the recent *Fun Home* tackled unacknowledged homosexuality within a marriage, *Evan Hansen* blazes its own trail out of depression and tortuous relationships by reaching for transparency. Like the others, it finds its absolutions ("Words Fail") by coming clean.

The company at the Ahmanson is exceptional in vocally and emotionally demanding roles. The intricacy of the unhummable music and anguished lyrics by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul (also credited with vocal arrangements) are not easily parsed. Help apparently came from Austin Cook (musical direction), Ben Cohn (associate music supervisor) and Michael Keller and Michael Aarons, listed as "music coordinators," plus additional contributions attributed to music supervisor Alex Lacamoire.

The complicated events of Steven Levenson's book risk being drowned out by the even greater complexity of the light and sound show (lighting by Japhy Weideman, sound by Nevin Steinberg), and by the fragmentation of Peter Nigrini's restless projections dancing all over David Korins'

movable scenic design.

Collectively, these may be catering to the short attention spans of current generations, but they become too much of a distracting muchness. And despite Grand Master Michael Greif's smooth direction that miraculously makes this all work — at some risk to coherence — *Dear Evan Hansen* does come together in its touching if perhaps overly optimistic resolution.

Would it be interesting, I wonder, to see a version of this musical stripped of its technical overlay? Would you want one? Would it hold up? Would it even work? The idea of boards and a passion does get lost in the Internet Age, which is what all this tech excess may also be trying to tell us. Because the human heart is still all that really matters. And despite its many convolutions, *Dear Evan Hansen* is one more proof of that.

Top image: The cast of Dear Evan Hansen *on stage at Center Theatre Group's Ahmanson Theatre.*

Photos by Matthew Murphy

WHAT: *Dear Evan Hansen*

WHERE: Center Theatre Group/Ahmanson Theatre
The Music Center, 135 N. Grand Avenue in Downtown L.A. 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Ends Nov. 25. Added 2pm performance Wednesday, Nov 21. No 8pm show on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 22. No Monday shows.

HOW: Tickets: $99 – $285 (subject to change) available online at CenterTheatreGroup.org or at (213) 972-4400 or in person at the Center Theatre Group Box Office. **Groups:** (213) 972-7231. **Deaf community**: visit CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS for information and charge.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, October 24th, 2018 at 7:06 pm and is filed under Theatre
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.