

# 'Next To Normal'—A visit into intensity with music

## Gilroy Dispatch

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by *Camille Bounds*

“Next To Normal” brought lyricist Brian Yorkey the 2009 Tony Award for Best Score and Tom Kitt two Tonys for Best New Score and Best Orchestration. Both won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in Drama for “Next To Normal”, rare for a musical.

We are going to be introduced to a woman with a manic-depressive personality and how she and her family cope, and it’s a pop-rock musical! Huh?

Well, fasten your seat belts. This is a stunning look into a little understood subject to the general public, and, oh yes, as I said it’s a contemporary, rock musical. The plot takes us into this dark, insidious disease and gives some perceptiveness that most have not experienced or been exposed to. Amazingly enough the performance for the most part is not depressing and at times is humorous and heart wrenching.



*Photo by Marty Cheek / MHLife*

Watching riveting Catherine Brady in the role of Diana in this Pulitzer Prize Award winning musical is like walking on a tight rope of an experience in fine theatre and vocalization brought to life.

Aaron Weisberg (as Diana's loving supportive husband) with Callie Camacho-Light (as her neglected daughter Natalie), Zack Goller (as Gabe her son) with Anthony Stephens (as Natalie's interest Henry) and Tyler Savin (as Dr. Madden/ Dr. Fine) bring in solid implementations and add strength to the sensitive and at times frenzied story with their performances and resilient voices.

Director/actor Ken Powell (best known for his fine co-direction of Shrek the Musical") keeps the mood and does not let the momentum of any moment stray.

The sets also by Ken Powell and Andrew Cunnings are unique and ingenious. The small but mighty orchestra under the direction of Christopher Adams brings in solid support for the production. Costumes by Michelle Griffin beautifully fit the mood. Sound and lighting by Brian Foley and Nathan Cummings are on the mark and never miss the intricate cues.

For an evening of fine theater "Next To Normal" delivers.

# Entertainment: SVCT takes audience on emotional roller coaster ride with ‘Next to Normal’

**Final two shows will be held this weekend**

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*By Staff Report*

*Photos by Marty Cheek*

Every few years or so, the South Valley Civic Theatre puts on a musical play in its season that is more emotionally challenging for its performers and audiences than the usual Broadway fun fare. With intense themes of a how a dysfunctional family deals with a member with mental illness, “Next to Normal” is such a play.

“‘Next to Normal’ won the Pulitzer Prize for drama and the Tony for best score, so we knew it was an outstanding work,” said co-producer Becky Garcia. “Members of the (SVCT) play committee had seen the play a number of times and knew it was a powerful and wonderful show and decided that it would be a good addition to our season.”



This weekend marks the last chance to see the performances of the play, a rock musical with book and lyrics by Brian Yorkey and music by Tom Kitt.

“Next to Normal” won raves from critics who admired its humane honesty in dealing with the issues of bipolar disorder, said SVCT co-producer Cara Kaiser-Lafaille.

“Mental illness holds a stigma in modern society, as most people shun what they don’t understand,” she said.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, about one in five adults in the U.S. experiences mental illness in a given year, she said.

“That’s close to 43.8 million people, which means at least one person in your life has been affected by some type of mental disorder,” she said. “It is important to educate our community on how to break down the barriers to assist people in getting the help and support they truly need. This show exemplifies how supportive some people can be, how difficult it can be for a family to be supportive, yet gives hope and light to the issue overall.”

SVCT actress Catherine Brady plays Diana, the mother who is dealing with bipolar II disorder.

“I have been warning people that the show contains strong language and adult themes,” she said. “If those are not things that bother you as a theatergoer, then I encourage you to check it out. But be prepared for an emotional experience.”

The most “impactful” responses she has received from audience members have been from people she hadn’t met before they came to see the show, she said.

“They have sought me out to tell me about how much they related to the story because their aunt, cousin, or other family member had dealt with or is currently dealing with similar issues,” she said. “‘Next to Normal’ is a piece of theater that will take you on an emotional roller coaster ride and make you think. That, combined with a fun, evocative, and at times breathtaking musical score, makes this an extremely worthwhile show to see.”



The complexly segmented stage set of the family’s house becomes a “character” in the play. It is designed to show what goes on inside a person’s home as well as their mind, said director Ken Powell.

“After doing some initial research it became clear that copying what Broadway did would be impossible as it involved three levels and a complete metal structure (something prohibitively expensive for community theaters),” he said. “We decided to go with a ‘cubed theme’ reminiscent of a rock stage. The stage is designed so as the show progresses it moves from less of an actual house to more of a facade.”

On the bottom level are panels that look like the inside of a house, but these turn and become just black and purple walls. In the beginning of the show windows are projected on the upper floors, but those disappear as the story progresses.

“This is all to portray the fact that the family in the show’s ‘home’ is becoming less and less what they believe a home should be and more and more what it actually is, a facade,” he said.

Kaiser-Lafaille said the power of the play is how it helps audiences develop some compassion for people facing mental illness and helps audiences understand the challenges faced by people with emotional health problems.

“I myself have struggled for years with depression and when I was finally diagnosed bipolar I, I found myself alone, stigmatized and unsupported,” she said. “After some time I was able to discover a handful of friends who were truly empathetic and caring. For that, I am truly blessed.”