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Entertainment & Life

Theater review | Fun Home: Musical does a good job of exploring the complexities of adulthood

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The joys, agonies and mysteries of growing up have rarely been explored with such sensitivity as in “Fun Home.”

CATCO delivers an exquisite production – the first by an Ohio theater company – of a heartfelt musical that pushed Broadway boundaries.

The intimate arena-style production, which opened Friday in the Riffe Center’s Studio Two Theatre, brings one distinctive but very human family into compelling close-ups that illuminate the innocence of childhood, the passions of adolescence and the bittersweet complexities of adulthood.

Director Steven C. Anderson is in his métier orchestrating this touching and amusing musical, adapted by author-lyricist Lisa Kron and composer-lyricist Jeanine Tesori from Alison Bechdel’s autobiographical graphic novel about her lesbian coming-of-age.

Together, three deft actresses create a compelling Alison. Her curiosity, courage and resilience add depth, humor and surprising nuance to a story that otherwise might sink into clichés of the small-town, American-family drama.

Cari Meixner narrates and comments with wry self-awareness as the 43-year-old cartoonist-writer reflects on her memories during her creative process.

As college-aged Medium Alison, Meg Odell sparks empathy and laughter with her intensity of passion and self-doubt.

Odell shines in one of the funniest scenes, also an exhilarating song (“Changing My Major”), as Alison connects with Joan (Jenny Case, droll in her sexual maturity and full of amused smiles but also compassion) at Oberlin College.

Odell's kaleidoscopic cascade of feelings and newfound self-awareness is endearing.

Sydney MacGilvray is sweet and precociously observant as 10-year-old Small Alison, who loves her father but only darkly senses his problems.

Meixner, Odell and MacGilvray enhance their beautifully linked roles with resonant singing, from MacGilvray's wide-eyed sense of discovery in "Ring of Keys" to the trio's soaring finale, "Flying Away."

As Bruce Bechdel, Alison's closeted father, Peter Matthew Smith aches with turbulent self-conflict barely masked by his good intentions, intermittent irritability and old-home-restoration preoccupations.

Kim Garrison Hopcraft subtly conveys the struggles of Helen, Bruce's long-suffering wife and Alison's wary mother, even as most of Helen's disquieting emotions are held deep inside.

The entire ensemble is effective, including Henry Smith and Hudson Mugler as Alison's young brothers and Ricardo Locci in multiple roles.

The fluid staging is reinforced by Darin Keesing's burnished lighting, Marcia Hain's gender-conscious costumes and Edith D. Wadkins' minimalist scenery, immersed within Alison's illustrations covering the floor.

Although this musical often feels more like a play with music, the score is central to its emotional complexities. Music director Quinton Jones and pianist Tyler Domer enhance the songs with poetic clarity.

The long one-act, suggested for mature teenagers and adults because of sexuality and some profanity, may not seem at first glance for every taste. Yet, everyone struggles to grow up. Everyone copes with the ups and downs of their families.

Buoyed by the accessibility of such a powerful production, anyone should find much to identify with in this rich chamber piece, the 2015 Tony winner for best musical.

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