

Review: TA's 'Next to Normal' is abnormally good



By Scott Johnston

Theatre Aurora wraps up the 2014 year with a terrific production of the musical 'Next to Normal.'

The story centres on Diane, a mother who has been dealing with bipolar disorder for many years. As the play unfolds over a period of several months we find out what she has been going through, how it has affected her husband and two children, and where they all go from here.

This may sound like unusual subject matter, especially for a musical, but somehow the story is both gripping and entertaining.

There are many factors that contribute to the show's success.

The music by Tom Kitt is catchy and even more effective by being played by a live six-piece band. It is further enhanced by Theatre Aurora's recently upgraded sound system.

Brian Yorkey's lyrics are extremely thought-provoking and well-written. This is especially evident in the many songs where different characters are alternating lyrics, which simultaneously tells more than one story, and allows you to see different perspectives.

This requires excellent and well-timed staging and choreography, which has been well-handled by director Michael Jones.

The set itself is minimal, with few props used, but is very effective in enhancing and focusing the action on stage.

But what truly brings this story alive is the amazing cast, who are probably the best ensemble of singers that has appeared on this stage in years.

Jody Butler as lead character Diane, has an exceptional voice, and her acting truly helps you feel her emotions.

As her husband Dan, Sergio Calderon displays the hardships of living in such a challenging situation, while trying to provide the necessary support for his family.

Evan Benyacar as son Gabe has some powerful songs, especially when interacting with Diane.

Megan Powell as daughter Natalie aptly portrays a young woman trying to cope in a world that seems upside-down. Trying to understand it all and support her is her boyfriend Henry, played by Nick Jeffrey.

Rounding out the cast is Rick Davidson, who does double duty as Doctors Fine and Madden.

Take a few moments from the busy holiday season to spend a reflective couple of hours at this excellent production. You'll be glad that you did.

Evening performances of 'Next to Normal' continue at Theatre Aurora, 150 Henderson Drive, December 11, 12 & 13. Tickets are available through the box office at 905-727-3669