

## "Next to Normal" at Carmel Community Players

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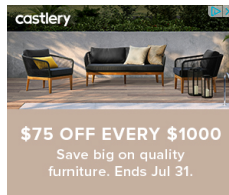
Photo by Charlie Hanover,  
CCP Board Vice President

4 stars

The rock musical *Next to Normal* is a dichotomy of heartbreaking and hopeful. Brian Yorkey (book and lyrics) and Tom Kitt (music), part of the team behind *If/Then*, crafted this show, which won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize and was nominated for the 2009 Tony Award for Best Musical. Their story gives audiences insight into the painful effects of mental illness on a family—in this case, the mother, who was diagnosed as bipolar and experiences hallucinations.

Carmel Community Players' production of this raw narrative is spot on. Carlo Nepomuceno (also the director) and Bill Fitch's set design is minimal but effective, letting the audience's full attention rest on the actors. Various levels segregate spaces and allow simultaneous events to take place in different locations. Nepomuceno utilizes the cast's talent to fill in the gaps.

Talent is in no short supply here. Georgeanna Teipen, as Diana, the mother, gives a powerful performance. Teipen's Diana never comes across as a slave to her illness, even when she attempts suicide, which from her perspective seems logical, and then when ECT treatments rob her of most of her memories. (As Diana's son sings in "Aftershocks": "ECT, the electric chair, we shock who we can't save.") Teipen channels this strength in "I Miss the Mountains," a song about how medication can dull you to the pain but also the joys of life. After one medication change, she is asked how she feels; Diana replies, "I feel...nothing," which her psychiatrist notes as "stable." A typical doctor's interpretation in psychopharmaceutical treatment. Likewise, Teipen conveys Diana's frustration in "You Don't Know."



Diana's husband and daughter are worse for the wear after living with her oddities for the last 16 years. Russell Watson, as her husband Dan, expresses the longtime suffering of a man who is devoted to his wife but doesn't really know how to help her. Watson's Dan is the most sympathetic character, as he portrays the patience and helplessness of his situation.

Sharmaine Ruth as their daughter Natalie combines the typical difficulty of being a teen-ager with the added burden of her family life. Ruth shows how angry Natalie is but also how lonely and sad. Ruth and Teipen share a poignant duet in "Superboy and the Invisible Girl." Ruth has a lovely, clear voice that carries Natalie's conflicting emotions. Daniel Hellman, as her sweet boyfriend Dan, is the most stable element in her life, and she doesn't know how to accept that kind of love.

Kyle Mottinger plays the crux of the family's dysfunction: the specter of Gabe. His rocking "I'm Alive" demands notice, symbolizing the relentless, inescapable nature of mental illness and grief, which his character represents.

Bradley Kieper rounds out the cast as Diana's two psychiatrists, aptly named Dr. Fine and Dr. Madden. Kieper's few scenes also get some of the funniest treatment as Diana's hallucinations take on a bizarre twist in "Who's Crazy/My Psychopharmacologist and I" and "Doctor Rock," which Kieper embraces wholeheartedly.

Toward the end, Diana says, "Most people who think they are happy haven't thought about it enough." Diana was diagnosed after only four months of grieving over a lost infant. The subtext in this show questions what is normal. As Natalie states later, maybe we should all accept that the more realistic goal should be something "next to normal."