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Nov

11/13/2019 4:41:00 PM

'Pray the Gay Away' a must see

Ken Stern

Wow: A world premiere musical, "Pray the Gay Away," opened at the Lincoln Theatre last week and through Nov. 24. For that reason, go. Minnesotans must go, you betcha! The play, set in suburban Minneapolis in 1982, offers a time capsule of church-based anti-gay prejudice at a time when almost all churches were anti-gay. It also is sadly current, even with the gains forced upon mainstream society for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered and queer individuals and organizations.

By definition world premieres are ambitious. This one is audacious: three ensembles, 26 songs, and a cast of 41.

This is a colorful, high energy production that had a supportive full house audience applauding throughout.

Addressing gay, and therefore human, rights through youth finding their sexuality and themselves at the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod congregation is brave. Introducing church members as likeable and large of spirit. And inserting the seven Jingle Sisters throughout as a chorus of flight attendants, lumberjacks and devil's assistants, always smiling while offering tight harmonies, is genius.

Great musicals have showstopping production numbers. This one's is "No More Musical Theatre," where conversion patient Tyler (Adrian Lane, well done) faces his, ahem, demons, and embraces his true Garland loving, Barbara Streisand wannabe self. Most of the cast joins in, singing and dancing, and line kicking.

The costumes in this scene, and throughout, are to die for (Kathryn Gildnes, costume design). The attention to detail and regional reproduction, capturing Minnesota in costuming, was superb.

The number, and the props for, "Beast is Best," which is what you think comes from healthy male heterosexuality, is laugh out loud funny, as is "Washing Machine, which also honors heterosexuality.

But this is a serious musical comedy and shares the lives, and survival, of the Youth Pride Group, an ensemble of 12 led by Lisa (Adia Bowen), Jerry (Nathan Esskew), Queenie (Lacy Craig) and Bamb (Rivera). Banned and shunned by their families, they create their own family and speak out, defend one another and confront injustice.

Meanwhile, Teenager Erik (Brayden Bowman, strongly played and sung), newly confirmed, only w God's hands. He couldn't be more clean cut, or unknowingly gay, coming into adulthood in his Vict Lutheran congregation.

Enter Dr. Richard Liten (Joe Bowen, supremely confident) and his star pupil Tyler whom the doctor as cured of his gayness.

The Victory Lutheran congregation are average people confident in the certainty of the faith, direct their pastor (Shawn Steiner, strongly confident) and dominated by church lady Mildred (Dulcey W channels electric blue attire intuited by Youth Pride adversaries). They show a remarkable capacity those who will agree with them.

And love is the answer, sung and discussed by all parties. Erik's mom Engebjorg, (Jenny Woods), wavers in choosing her son over her congregation and his father, Peder, (Tim Brown) crossed the line to stick with his son.

Church forces and Youth Pride forces square off in a Bible debate and both sing of love to their pe is Erik who grows into the conclusion that "My God is bigger than that" and walks into the Youth P and an unknown future with a new extended family, one that includes his parents.

It is the Youth Pride teens who point out that believing as a Christian and acting like one are two v different things.

This play is a powerhouse of history and current events told in story, songs and dance, with seriou earnestness, pathos, humor and an honesty that does not vilify the conservative Missouri Synod L congregation it portrays. Didacticism creeps in at the close, but education is a production purpose today, some still believe that gayness can be cured by conversion therapy.

Musical theatre is larger than life, two dimensional and can veer toward caricature. This one does with purpose and occasional irreverence. Martin Luther, the faith's founder, makes several appear; instance.

This is Conrad Askland's brain child and baby. Askland wrote the book, music and lyrics and plays while directing the seven piece rock band. He has created a tour de force.

He is not quite ready for Broadway – the volume from his band needs lowering – but this show's p vast.

The production values are first rate. All directors, designers and managers excelled. The choreogra (Donna Carroll), costuming and lighting (Mat Wend), and band and song performance are credits i themselves but their blending together is a result of directors Lindsey Bowen's and Gabriel Guevar touch with their cast and crew.

A production of Theater Arts Guild, the group is to be applauded for taking on a project this compl off the stage on many levels. The Guild is using this as an educational opportunity and reaching o schools and churches.

Warnings: this is PG 13 rated with sexual themes, a gunshot and suicide attempt.

"Pray the Gay Away" plays Nov. 14 and weekends through Nov. 24 at the Lincoln Theatre. Informa <https://ptgashow.com/>

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Published every Wednesday in La Conner Washington
Located at 119 North Third Street in La Conner. Mail: P.O Box 1465, La Conner WA

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