

From TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

Last Summer at Bluefish Cove



Photo by Frank Ishman

Fountain Theatre

In the late Jane Chambers' once controversial 1974 dramedy *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, a diverse but steadfast group of queer women friends migrate each summer to the same remote Long Island beachfront enclave to hang together, solidifying their longtime friendship as they commiserate about the struggle to exist within the narrow confines of the world outside their own.

Into their cloistered midst comes Eva (Lindsay LaVanchy), a recently divorced and obviously lost straight woman who has stumbled into their community having no idea these women play for the other team. Although her presence offers a perfect comedic contrivance to exhibit what a wonderfully wry and witty playwright Chambers was, along the way Eva's rapid education into the lesbian lifestyle four decades ago also presents the quintessential rule-shattering engine to challenge the restrictive and narrow-minded conventions inherent in our society back when *Bluefish Cove* was written.

The irony here is that this groundbreaking play first played for two years at this same theatre from 1983 to 1985, exactly 40 years ago and before the Fountain even became the Fountain, starring a then unknown Jean Smart as Lil, the tough-talking veteran summer resident of the Cove with whom Eva finds new life. That love can reach beyond the confines of Eva's sheltered existence before stumbling into a whole new world she only vaguely knew existed salutes the power of Chambers' signature vision.

“Gay women are kind of like hobbits,” Lil (Ann Sonnevile) explains to the sufficiently wide-eyed Eva. “No matter how oppressive earthlings get, we continue to thrive in Middle Earth. We are survivors. We straddle both worlds and try to keep our balance.”

This bold new direction more than intrigues Eva, who falls hard for Lil despite her new friend correctly identifying her neediness as something stemming from loneliness, vulnerability, and curiosity—all traits that scare the bejesus out of her. Still, by the beginning of the play’s second act, the two are an item and Eva is trying to decide if her dining room set and six-foot couch will fit in Lil’s typically tiny Manhattan apartment.

This unexpected new relationship is closely scrutinized by Lil’s close knit and protective comrades: her best friend and successful sculptor Annie and her once-married lover Rae (Noelle Messier and Ellen D. Williams), closeted physician turned popular “high priestess of feminism” author Kitty and her secretary-with-benefits Rita (Sarah Scott Davis and Tamika Katon-Donegal), and wealthy but defeated heiress Sue putting up with her spoiled brat of a girl-toy Donna (Stasha Surdyke and Stephanie Pardi).

Together, this exceptional group of veteran actors create a fiercely loyal and extremely plausible family unit, gifting this production as a posterchild for ensemble performance at its best, almost never sinking into what could easily be played as stereotypical behavior.

The one minor early exception is LaVanchy, who begins the play pushing too hard as the naive and Stepford-y housewife/breeder Eva, but by Act Two, as her character finds her way and her strength, clearly so does she. Perhaps this is accomplished by playing opposite Sonnevile, whose indelible depiction of Lil, the wary hardknock modern Mother Courage privately facing the toughest battle of her life, is what makes the entire production breathe.

It’s the collective skill of this cast that keeps Chambers’ four-decade old play from descending into being more than a tad dated, overcoming the friends’ continuous use of the now seldom heard word “dyke” to describe themselves. Talk about answering machines, watching Phil Donahue, and ordering clothes from catalogs might come off as ancient references in 2023, but the concern about Kitty’s career facing possible ruin if her dreaded secret becomes public is today thankfully a fear which in general has hopefully evolved despite the dinosaurs of the conservative right whose unbelievably backward current attack on freedom and equality is keeping the tar licking at their sensible heels.

Under the sensitive direction of Hannah Wolf, the Fountain’s history with *Bluefish Cove* and the company’s usual demanding insistence on excellence makes this the quintessential place to celebrate and honor the 40th anniversary of one of the most noteworthy theatrical contributions recounting the hotbed beginnings of the gay rights and second-wave feminist movements—something that, to one character living in 1974, still sounded “like a disturbance in the lower colon.”

Surely sparked by the Fountain's production of *The Octoroon* last summer, the first to magically transform the theatre's parking lot into an outdoor stage, the choice to present the tale's seaside location as an al fresco experience is an inspired choice here.

Although it surely introduced a challenge to Wolf and her designers, from Desma Murphy's set that cleverly meanders from Lil's cabin out to her beloved beach and fishing deck, to Andrea Almond's sound and RS Buck's lighting, it's lovely to feel the "ocean" breezes as the play unfolds—although perhaps the creators didn't count on the Cove still being quite so chilly by mid-June this year.

It also must present a special challenge to the actors, who must have had to get used to a sea of patrons out front all wearing glowing blue-lit earphones, a device decided upon probably, as was the show's early 7pm curtain time, to keep the Fountain's neighbors happy. Still, one of the true joys of live performance is to sense the audience's reactions as they spontaneously happen and change each night; I doubt if people laugh and sob as freely with the story emanating within their heads.

As much as a pioneer Chambers was at presenting lesbian relationships with such warmth and humanity for the first time, she was also uncanny in her ability to pour out her own feelings in one other often ignored territory. Diagnosed with cancer in 1981, the playwright's personal battle and how her own circle of friends dealt with her struggle became a real-time issue in *Bluefish Cove* and, in the process, helped make her characters far more identifiable to viewers initially only focused on their sexual orientation.

Now here's the thing about writing for my own platform, free to say whatever I want rather than having to bow to overly eager editors and the limitations of journalistic rules and regulations. As someone who has triumphed over the Big C five times in my life, the first at age 20 and the most recently at the height of the pandemic—as I faced daily trips to my oncologist for radiation treatments checking out the lobby to be sure my fellow travelers were wearing their masks over their mouths *and* noses—Lil's stubbornness not accepting her fate without a fight was something with which I identified bigtime.

Her final speech resonated to my core, immediately bringing back my own reaction confronting a gloriously emotive sunset three weeks ago at Casapueblo, the lategreat Uruguayan artist Carlos Paez Vilaro's self-designed Picasso-esque citadel situated on a remote peninsula in Punta Bellena, halfway between Montevideo where I had just finished teaching an acting intensive and the glorious beaches of Punta del Este. Simply, it was an unexpected experience that made me feel as though I might be saying goodbye to such beauty for the last time.

After an exhaustive tour conducting workshops in three major South American cities and feeling every bit of my 76 years as my fellow tourmates helped me navigate stone stairs and broken sidewalks (granted I had traveled nearly 17,000 miles with a fractured rib and two stitches in my inner thigh), listening to the disembodied voice of Paez Vilaro, reciting

his beautiful “*Ceremonia del Sol*” as the fiery sun set over the calm and twinkling waters of the majestic Atlantic, did me in when the artist ended with the heartfelt phrase “Chau, Sol.”

I was slapped with my mortality quite dramatically right about then and that haunting evocation, as the artist poetically said farewell to the disappearing sun, instantly made me dissolve into tears. Luckily, as my newly minted touring family members wrapped their arms around me, my fellow instructor Eric Campros reminded me that Paez Vilaro’s lovely goodbye to the day was followed by the phrase “*Manana te espero otra vez*”—or “I’ll wait for you again tomorrow.”

As Lil reminisces while staring out at her beloved beach and sea, “Next summer, someone else will be standing at this window watching a July sunset. And Rae and Annie will be sitting over there sipping drinks and they’ll say to this stranger at the window, ‘Beautiful sunset, isn’t it? Lil loved that view. She thought God put that rock down there for her. When she stood on it with the surf pounding against it, spraying salt so high that she could taste it on her lips, she was the Queen of Bluefish Cove.’ I can’t seem to say goodbye to that beach out there.”

Take my breath away, Jane Chambers; not only did you honor the struggles of an entire community of some of society’s most disenfranchised people, you were able to bravely share what was in your heart as someone with limited time genuinely mourning what would soon be lost.

First and foremost, of course this fine revival of a significant modern classic is important to revisit because it heralds to a new generation the strength and resiliency of people who identified as queer 40 years ago, people who dared to love however and whomever they chose and fought the overpowering hostility that tried to force them—force us—into hiding at a time when the idea of marriage equality seemed a concept we would never see in our lifetimes.

Last Summer at Bluefish Cove provides something that desperately needs retelling, particularly at this point in time when one greedy and drastically debased political party leads the charge to strike down the rights people as courageous as this mold-breaking playwright and her not-so fictional summer friends seeking camaraderie and authentication fought so valiantly to conquer.

I wish Jane Chambers could still be around to tell the setting sun “*Manana te espero otra vez*” and to see what the Fountain Theatre has accomplished breathing wonderful new life into her greatest play.

THROUGH AUG. 27: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Av., LA. [323.663.1525](tel:323.663.1525) or fountaintheatre.com



Photo by Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman for MurphyMade

Pantages Theatre and the Segerstrom Center for the Arts

Beginning in London's West End in 2018 presented in association with the recently late-great rock superstar herself, *TINA—The Tina Turner Musical* went on to win an Olivier Award before arriving on Broadway the following year and taking home its lion's share of honors—including being nominated for 12 Tony Awards, winning one for its original star Adrienne Warren.

Born Anna Mae Bullock into a dirt-poor sharecropping family in Nutbush, Tennessee in 1939 (the youthful Anna Mae played here in a showstopping turn by Ayvah Johnson, a kid with Turner-sized pipes herself), the future Queen of Rock 'n Roll did more than simply achieve international acclaim. The 12-time Grammy winner's legendary live shows have sold more tickets than any other solo performer in music history and along the way, during her incredible six-plus decade career, Turner did more than change the rules: she rewrote them, defying the previously unwieldy limitations of age, gender, and race in the music business with a fiery determination to buck the odds at all costs.

There's something both bittersweet and celebratory about *TINA* arriving here and making its west coast debut at the Pantages only three weeks since she left us all wanting more at age 83, the historic theatre only steps away and around the corner from her Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, an honor dedicated 37 years ago in front of the Capital Records building where she recorded some of her greatest hits.

Katori Hall, the celebrated Pulitzer-winning co-writer of the musical, wrote, "We have always wanted to put audiences in the room with her and it's obviously going to have even more meaning now that she's gone from us physically."

Although *TINA* has already swept London and Broadway in the last five years, its residency here in one of the most recognized capitals of the music business in the world so

soon after Turner's death proves LA to be the quintessential place to celebrate her music and her life. The show's opening night felt as though it was a giant 2,700-seat memorial service—no, more like a joyous Irish wake—and the fact that its subject was co-executive producer with her husband Erwin Bach and creative consultant on its inception could not have made it more special.

The book by Hall (currently also represented in LA with her play *The Mountaintop* opening at the Geffen Playhouse), written in a collaboration with Frank Ketelaar and Kees Prins, defies the usual pitfalls too often present in the overworked and typically whitewashed genre of musical stage biographies. The book never blinks from delving into the shocking physical and mental abuse Turner suffered from childhood on, nor does it avoid her difficult early post-like “hasbeen” years with repro men knocking on her door, chronicling a desperate suicide attempt, or trying to maneuver the strained relationship she shared with her distant and often absent mother (Roz White).

Noted *Mamma Mia!* director Phyllida Lloyd does a monumental job wrangling the breakneck rollercoaster ride that is *TINA* fluid, managing to keep a huge ensemble of over 30 incredibly exciting performers on the move, delivering nonstop, visually stunning action while still keeping the proceedings squarely focused on the actor portraying the omnipresent title character who appropriately dominates every scene.

And it's that focus that makes the potentially dangerously formulaic musical such an unexpected wonder to experience. It's not hard to understand why two performers share the emotionally and physically demanding role, each playing four performances a week on the production's eight-show schedule.

Alternating with Zurin Villanueva, it's impossible to imagine how anyone could be better portraying the great Tina Turner than Naomi Rodgers, who even after what must be an exhausting two-hour-plus whirlwind performance on opening night turned *TINA*'s enthusiastic and well-deserved standing ovation into something of a dance party, granting the grateful audience two additional numbers after the curtailment, culminating with a breakneck reprise of “Proud Mary.”

Anthony Van Laast adds to the jubilation with his energetic, whimsically all elbows-and-knees choreography, as does Mark Thompson's flashy set and costuming, Bruno Poet's lighting, and Nevin Steinberg's sound design.

None of this would be as spectacular without Jeff Sugg's colorful and flashback-ing psychedelic projections, musical director Anne Shuttlesworth leading her dynamic live orchestra, or some exceptional supporting performances—particularly the pint-sized Johnson, White's imperfect mother whose own abusive life hampered her ability to parent, and Carla R. Stewart as Turner's loving and supportive grandmother.

So, “What's Love Got to Do with It”? Just about everything here. *TINA — The Tina Turner Musical* is more than beautifully mounted, fiercely performed, and dazzlingly designed: it is

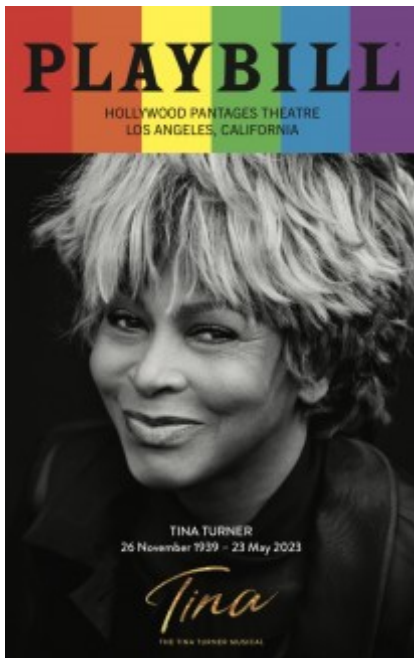
brimming with love: love for the artform at its most contemporary and unflinchingly bold, love for unstoppable warriors who survive every obstacle placed before them, and especially love for the late-great Queen of Rock 'n Roll, an unforgettable superstar the likes of whom the world had never seen before her long and revered reign.

“Her energy, her spirit, obviously has been interwoven into our creative processes,” Katori Hall wrote about this poignant and serendipitously timed opening of *TINA* at the Pantages, “and I pray that we’ll always be able to give every audience member a little piece of Tina when they come to the show.”

Mission accomplished—and then some.

THROUGH JULY 9: Pantages Theatre, 6233 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood.
[800.982.2787](tel:800.982.2787) or [broadwayinhollywood](http://broadwayinhollywood.com)

JULY 11 THROUGH 23: Segerstrom Center for the Arts, 600 Town Center Dr., Costa Mesa. [714.556.2787](tel:714.556.2787) or scfta.org





A Transparent Musical



Photo by Craig Schwartz

Mark Taper Forum

There's something monumental about the world premiere of Joey and Faith Soloway's *A Transparent Musical*, the uber-talented siblings' joyous stage adaptation of their popular and groundbreaking Amazon Prime TV series.

With book by Joey Soloway and MJ Kaufman and music and lyrics by Faith Soloway, the first treat here is to see so many diverse and gender-unencumbered theatre artists performing together on a professional stage as respected as our own venerable Mark Taper Forum.

Debating at the kickoff of Pride Month, the production has many components for which people considered a tad out of the conventional societal norm can be proud, seeing themselves onstage represented as real, living, breathing, multidimensional characters rather than be forced into the usual stereotypes we all know so well.

The Golden Globe and multiple Emmy-winning *Transparent* series introduced the world to Mort Pfefferman (Daya Curley here in the double-Emmy-winning role made famous by Jeffrey Tambor), a good upstanding Jewish Pacific Palisades father who, at the rapid approach of his golden years, decides it's time to come out of hiding to his shocked family and begin his transition to become the woman he always felt in his heart he was.

The crisis in the already shattered Pfefferman household is not an easy revelation for his ex-wife Shelly (Liz Larsen) and two older children Sarah and Josh (Sarah Stiles and Zachary Prince), but it is especially an emotional knockout to his youngest Ali (Adina Verson), who is also finding her own sexuality to be a thorny issue.

Transforming (pun intended) the Pfeffermans' story into a musical was yet another Soloway-sparked inspiration, especially considering the exceptional songwriting skill of Faith Soloway, whose evocative and catchy score is one of the biggest assets offered by this production, along with Tina Landau's clever and fourth wall-breaking direction and spirited choreography by James Alsop.

Curley is perfectly cast as Mort, who soon demands the shocked Pfefferman family and friends start calling her Maura, particularly because, as her program bio reveals, the actor has gone through a similar personal journey with gender transitioning.

Verson is easily relatable, gifted not only with an uncanny ability to make their character's struggle identifiable to anyone in the audience without getting stuck on the specifics of Ali's search for identity, but possessed of a voice that delivers the Soloways' message with the clarity of a musical theatre Judy Collins.

Stiles is a particular standout as Maura and Shelly's whiny and terminally Jewish-American-Princess-esque daughter, on a fierce mission to present the perfect nuclear family to the outside world while popping antidepressants like candy and exhibiting an

impressive determination to prove her child's lice infection was only an allergic reaction.

Larsen is a continuous scene-stealer as Shelly, vying at every turn to grab the spotlight and once again become the center of attention of her family and followers as the past president of her temple's community center.

There are truly memorable turns in this bright and unstoppably game ensemble of crack performers. Murphy Taylor Smith is especially notable as the JCC's sweet new rabbi Raquel, as is Futaba Shioda, substituting at the performance I attended for Kasper as the center's new artistic director on a secret personal mission, and Jimmy Ray Bennett, in for LA treasure Pat Towne as both the center's overly-eager executive director and as the recurring ghost of Magnus Hirschfeld, the real life sex and gender expert who chronicled alternate lifestyles in the freethinking Weimar era of pre-Nazi Germany.

This is certainly an ambitious and exciting project, but not one without need for further exploration. As someone unacquainted with *Transparent* during its TV years, I felt at a disadvantage here. It was not hard to pick out the fans of the original series peppered throughout the audience, as isolated pockets of cheers or shared laughter from different sections of the house heralded a clear familiarity with the material.

Kaufman and Soloway's script surely recalls everything that made the show so successful, but hey—they had five seasons to delve into the lives of all the peripheral characters and storylines surrounding the central tale of Mort/Maura Pfefferman and how they dealt with their family's brave new world.

For me, I wish the musical version were pared down to the essentials. As much as I enjoyed Faith Soloway's prolific score and the performances of this incredibly diverse band of players, I would have liked to have seen the much appreciated and perfectly timed adaptation focus on the immediate family and how their lives are affected by their new unexpected challenges, not get bogged down and ultimately even lost in several complicated subplots concerning the show's multitude of interesting but less pivotal characters.

Perhaps that way, this promising fresh version of *Transparent* could slash at least a third of their eventually too long two-hour and 40-minute run time and maybe those smothering side stories, dealing with divorces and sex addictions and finding long-lost family members, might one day become *A Transparent Musical 2*. And since Faith Soloway has too many great songs to lose, the sequel could already have its own score.

I know I'd be there opening night with bells on—maybe even a feather boa.

THROUGH JUNE 25: Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Av., LA. [213.628.2772](tel:213.628.2772) or CenterTheatreGroup.org

Back Porch



Photo by Keira Wight

Victory Theatre Center

The world premiere of *Back Porch*, Eric Anderson's loving homage to William Inge's classic tale *Picnic*, delivers a charming, sweet little gem of a play to the Victory.

Anderson grew up in rural Kansas in the early 1950s, where he developed a lifelong obsession with both Hollywood and Inge's Pulitzer-winning drama when as a child in the summer of 1955, his family journeyed to the next county to watch part of the time-honored Oscar-winning version of *Picnic* being filmed.

"I've been crazy about movies and theatre ever since," says Anderson. "I wanted to pay tribute to a significant American playwright, William Inge, who was also significantly closeted. I hoped to write the kind of play that he himself might have written had he lived in another time and place."

Clearly, Anderson is correct and he has done just that. On Kenneth Klimak's simple rustic countrified porch set, a young man named Gary Opat (Isaac W. Jay) is no smoldering Kim Novak but he shares Madge Owens' frustration and anxiety coming of age stuck in a small town and missing out on the more adventurous aspects of life he only reads about happening in other more vibrant places—in Gary's case, Hollywood, a place he only dreams about lost soaking up his movie magazines.

Along comes a strapping and world-wise young urban cowboy with dubious intentions named Bill Holman (Jordan Morgan), who becomes the life-changing Hal Carter to Gary's innocence-challenged Madge. In Anderson's clever tale, it seems the guy is actually connected to Joshua Logan's film version, as he's in town working as stunt double for William Holden himself since—wouldn't you know it?—Logan's actual movie is currently being filmed right there in their overwhelmed little community.

Anderson's play is extremely promising, which is perhaps the best way to also describe this production. It's promising, not perfect. What's needed most is stronger direction from Kelie McIver, whose staging is impressive but guidance in keeping the cast on the same page needs improvement. When there are this many one-person shows on one stage at the same time, it's the director who must help them together forge a convincing ensemble.

Particularly in the first act, the languid pace, which is surely intentional to show the boring routine of the people who inhabit the Opats' back porch, gets a little *too* languid to keep its viewers interested. This is exacerbated by most of the performances, with actors left alone to create their quirky characters but doing little to successfully communicate with and bounce off one another.

I would love to know what Jay and Morgan see when they look out front into the fourth wall; as it is, it seems instead of envisioning hills and valleys, both are making sure their most important lines and emotional moments land just above the audience's heads. We get it just hearing Anderson's evocative dialogue without being treated as though we need it to be hammered in.

In the first act, Jay has the hardest time simply because his twink-ish years are obviously a bit too far in the past. Getting to a place of Gary's late teenage angst and refreshingly angelic unsullied *golly-gee-ery* is just past his prime. By the second half, his character's newly minted maturity grows exponentially and works like gangbusters, although if tears don't come when scripted, unconvincing wailing buried in your partner's shoulder is not an alternative.

Morgan fares better as Bill, although even though his character's intentions are purposely suspect, the true nature of his attraction to Gary is still in flux in his otherwise convincing interpretation.

The best performances at this early point in the evolution of *Back Porch* are a delightfully rich turn by Jonathan Fishman as the family's lovable neighbor and constant visitor to the Opat social hub of a porch Millard Goff and particularly Karl Maschek as Gary and Del Wayne's initially milquetoast widower father Barney.

Maschek, the play's resident George Tesman of the mid-century American South, is simply the heart and soul of this production. In the first act, the character is interesting but only hints at being pivotal, but in the second half as the play's series of crises unfold, he becomes a titan. The disappointments he has suppressed in himself and the guilt about how he has managed to raise his sons as a single father after the death of his wife is simply heartbreaking—and when Barney himself breaks, Maschek is nothing short of riveting.

Erik Zac as the annoying Rosalind Russell schoolteacher-boarder character here called Myron Uhrig and Cody Lemmon as Gary's brash young outspoken younger sibling Del Wayne both have endearing moments but, in general, this cast (save Maschek) needs to

stop working so hard and instead begin truly listening to and connecting with one another.

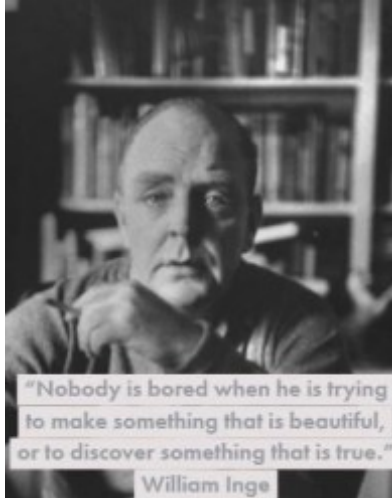
This doesn't mean such a thing won't happen here, particularly considering the potential magic inherent in Anderson's play. The performance I attending was one of the first. Give these obviously talented performers a few more performances under their belt and I truly suspect great things will begin to happen. Just please trust the playwright's evocative and well-chosen words, folks; it's all right there for you without having to push so hard.

Unfortunately, since the late-great William Inge's shame over his repressed homosexuality and his long documented struggle with alcohol and depression led to his suicide at age 60 in 1973, creating a play dealing with a forbidden love affair between two young men discovering their attraction to one another at a bucolic smalltown family's simple country home in the repressed 1950s does somehow honor a tortured but immensely talented wordsmith who, despite his success, was never able to achieve the even greater heights of what might have been due to the societal limitations of the times he created his masterworks.

Somehow I think, if he could, Inge would be thanking Eric Anderson profusely for continuing and building upon his legacy with his lovely, lyrical *Back Porch*.

THROUGH JULY 9: Victory Theatre Center, 3324 W. Victory Blvd, Burbank.

818.841.5421 or thevictorytheatrecenter.org



Six



Photo by Joan Marcus

Pantages Theatre and the Segerstrom Center for the Arts

It's an encouraging sign of the times that musical theatre continues to reinvent itself and has begun to take some bold chances, refusing to be stuck perpetually shouting at Dover to move his bloomin' arse or harmonizing about that bright golden haze on the meadow.

That said, Tony Marlow and Lucy Moss' blockbuster musical *Six* really isn't—a musical, I mean. Instead, it's a glittering, raucous, electric-shock loud, neon-flashing pop concert. As such, it's a treat unless, of course, you were intent on getting lost in a storyline rather than spend 90 intermissionless minutes watching an expanded version of *Chicago's* "Cellblock Tango."

Six is a thin retelling of the individual stories of Henry VIII's doomed ex-wives, each of whom in turn sing out their own tragic story in powerful rock-goddess fashion under the premise that the audience is to decide which of them was the most memorable blip on the radar screen of convoluted English history.

The competition is played out directly to the audience, immediately evoking the image of one of those impressively overproduced and popular TV talent shows. One could almost envision a table set up at the front of the house with Katy Perry or Lionel Ritchie or Simon Cowell seated facing the stage ready to hold up numbers on giant cards after each number.

After the group opening "Ex-Wives," where the ladies further summon Kander and Ebb *deja vu* as they stand in a line across the front of the Pantages stage and alternately wail about their fate ("Divorced, beheaded, died / Divorced, beheaded, survived"), the six performers rocking this tour are equally dynamic as they belt out Marlow and Moss' infectious Tony-winning score.

One by one, Khaila Wilcoxon as Catherine Aragon, Olivia Donaldson as Anna of Cleves, Courtney Mack as Katherine Howard, and Gabriella Carrillo as Catherine Park prove themselves worthy of popstar chops, while the pint-sized but fierce Storm Lever seems to be channeling early Kristin Chenoweth as Anne Boleyn.

Natalie Paris, who originated the role of Jane Seymour in the musical's initial West End debut and received an Olivier nomination for her performance, is still the standout here, graced with delivering the score's most memorable ballad, "Heart of Stone."

The infamous demise of King VIII's sextet of marital victims is surely an unlikely inspiration for a pop musical which, behind the splash and razzle-dazzle, celebrates feminist activism and the battle against misogyny and female victimization—albeit a tad incongruous as set in Tudor-era London. Yet under the direction of Moss and Jamie Armitage and featuring spirited choreography by Carrie-Anne Ingrouille, there's something oddly empowering about this unexpected worldwide theatrical phenomenon that began humbly in 2017 performed by Cambridge University students at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

With an exceptional all-female band led by musical director/keyboardist Valerie Maze, Flash Gordon-meets-Grace Jones Tony-winning costuming by Gabriella Slade, incredibly evocative lighting by Tim Deiling, and concert-worthy sound by Paul Gatehouse, *Six* gets its audience up and moving by its Spice Girl-y finale. Still, if you're looking for a plot, a character arc, and maybe even some emotionally charged resolution within the confines of ancient (albeit fictionalized) British history, better wait for the current New York revival of *Camelot* to hit the road.

You might need to be of my generation to understand this reference, but I give *Six* an eight: it has a good beat and you can dance to it.

NOW CLOSED: Pantages Theatre, 6233 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood. [800.982.2787](tel:8009822787) or [broadwayinhollywood](http://broadwayinhollywood.com)

JUNE 13 THROUGH 25: Segerstrom Center for the Arts, 600 Town Center Dr., Costa Mesa. [714.556.2787](tel:7145562787) or scfta.org

A New Brain



Photo by Jeff Lorch

Celebration Theatre at the Los Angeles LGBT Center

In 1992, *Falsettos*' Tony-winning composer William Finn started to experience dizziness, blurred vision, and partial paralysis. After collapsing in a restaurant, he was rushed to a hospital where doctors discovered he was suffering from arteriovenous malformation in his brain stem.

After undergoing radical gamma knife surgery, during his subsequent year of forced rest and recuperation Finn said he felt as though he had a whole new brain. Driven by his art as he has always been and with the help of his longtime collaborator James Lapine, they pair turned his traumatic personal experience into—what else?—a musical.

Writing about his fear of dying before creating his finest work, *A New Brain* began in a concert version at the Public Theatre in 1996, featuring all those tunes rattling around in Finn's healing but still prolific head during his ordeal and dealing with his efforts to get back to work.

The first full staging at Lincoln Center in 1998 began the journey of Finn's most personal work, which after its five-month off-Broadway run has been performed infrequently over the ensuing years since musicals about demon barbers and phantoms haunting opera houses seem to be something potentially more entertaining to the general public than finding a production about surviving a brain aneurysm as a possible fun night out.

In its return to production after our dastardly three-year nightmare which has killed off so many small LA theatre companies, the scrappy Celebration Theatre has chosen *A New Brain* as its first post-pandemic offering, now being presented in association with the LA LGBT Center.

This particular musical is a daring choice for Celebration's return, especially with a spirited

cast of 10 crowded onto the Center's charming but teenyweeny Davidson/Valentini stage where director Khanisha Foster and choreographer Alli Miller-Fisher have done yeoman's duty keeping their cast from banging into one another in about an 18-by-30-foot playing space.

Joined by musical director/keyboardist Gregory Nabours conducting a knockout four-member band placed behind curtains above and behind the stage on Stephen Gifford's remarkably facile set, which utilizes the aisles and actors often standing directly adjacent to its audience manners, the fact that this works and stays in continual motion is a major accomplishment commendable in every regard.

As Finn's alter ego, Amanda Kruger is in excellent voice as the show's helpless protagonist Gordon Schwinn, although it's disappointing there's not a more concrete character arc presented here. Gordon's initial frustration and anguish writing songs for a creatively stifling TV children's show, the difficulties putting up with well-meaning but often annoying people hovering around their hospital room, and the eventual trials of the recuperation process, all track in about the same emotional range.

Kruger is still lovable, nicely interacting with their dynamic and delightfully eager supporting cast. Yassi Noubahar provides a wonderful complement as Gordon's lover Roger, based on Finn's own longtime life partner Arthur Salvatore. Gina Torrecilla as Gordon's well-meaning but smothering mother Mimi and Sade Ayodele as their bestie Rhoda are standouts, as is Ryan O'Connor (obviously the secret lovechild of Paul Lynde and Charles Nelson Reilly) as the obligatorily flamboyant night nurse Richard.

Richardson Cisneros-Jones is hilarious as Gordon's father and also as Mr. Bungee, the life-sized bullfrog star of the children's series who pops in and out of the overthinking patient's dreams, although someone should tell the actor it's not necessary to project his voice to the back tier of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion's many balconies when audience members are seated literally a foot away.

Whitney Avalon, Jason Ryan, Mitchell Johnson, and Gabi Van Horn are infectious as various individuals converging on Gordon's busy and tuneful hospital room, but the true stars of this *Brain*-trust are the talented team of Foster and Miller-Fisher, who are so incredibly good at keeping these players moving in such a cramped space that if they directed and choreographed the folks waiting in line at DMV, they could make a trip to renew one's driver's license an enjoyable experience.

As much as I wholeheartedly support this revival presented as gender-expansive in its casting choices, I also think it's rather a disservice to the production to make a point of that decision and advertise *A New Brain* with such a clear emphasis on that choice.

Lapine and Finn already tickled the norm 25 years ago by writing a play about a gay character named Gordon and his boyfriend Roger, something that in no way changes the nature of the couple's commitment to one another.

For me, colorblind and gender-fluid casting has been a non-issue for a long time in the more socially advanced world of the arts—and particularly in the world of theatre. It takes about 30 seconds flat to get past any initial surprise, which solidifies once again how truly unimportant race or gender is in how we respond to people and the joys and dilemmas they face in life.

Especially in a presentation mounted by the Celebration Theatre, one of our country's oldest and most respected companies presenting mostly LGBT content over the past 41 years in operation, there simply seems to be no need for making a point of gender issues here since it has nothing to do with Gordon's journey.

I know of no history of rednecks and evangelicals picketing theatres that have previously brought *A New Brain* to fruition over the last quarter century because its protagonists are in a same sex relationship. William Finn and James Lapine have written a musical about two people who love each other and everyone else depicted in their story has no issue with their relationship that a director or casting director would need to work around.

This cleverly staged and charmingly human production stands on its own quite nicely without any need to point out that the gender fluidity in its ensemble makes it a “unique opportunity to see *A New Brain* in Los Angeles as it has never been done before.” What's far more important here is how each of us identifies with coming face to face with our own mortality and to understand Gordon's greatest fear: to leave the planet with our best songs still unwritten.

THROUGH JUNE 24: Los Angeles LGBT Center, Davidson/Valenti Theatre, 1125 N. McCadden Place, Hollywood. [323.860.7300](tel:323.860.7300) or lalgbtcenter.org/tickets

See? I'm an Angel



