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A New Brain

The Astoria Performing Arts Center presents a revival of William Finn and James Lapine's musical, *A New Brain*.



The following description is from the show's press release: "*A New Brain* tells the story of Gordon, a struggling songwriter, who suffers a medical crisis when something goes wrong with his brain and he is forced to undergo surgery. At the time he is struck by illness, he is reluctantly composing a song for a children's television show featuring a frog by the name of 'Mr. Bungee.' The specter of this large green character and the unfinished work haunts him throughout his medical ordeal as he learns to appreciate life's precious moments, and finds new inspiration to compose the songs he yearns to produce."

Pictured: A scene from A New Brain

nytheatre.com review

David Hilder · May 11, 2007

In 1992, William Finn won two Tony awards for the Broadway production of his landmark musical *Falsettos*—he won Best Score and shared Best Book with his co-writer and director, James Lapine. Not long after, Finn found himself in the hospital, at death's door with a presumably inoperable brain tumor. It's no surprise, then, that Finn's next show (another collaboration with Lapine) was *A New Brain*, about a composer who is suddenly hospitalized with a risky brain injury. In 2002, Astoria Performing Arts Center's first show was *Opening Doors*, and it featured the Bill Finn song "Heart and Music," the cornerstone of *A New Brain*'s score. Now APAC is producing *A*

VENUE

Broccoli Theater,
Variety Boys & Girls
Club, 21-12 30th
Road, Astoria,
Queens

OPENED

May 4, 2007

CLOSED

May 20, 2007

PERFORMANCES

Fri - Sat at 8pm;
Sun at 6pm

RUNNING TIME

1 hour, 45 minutes
No intermission

TICKETS

\$15 - \$18
\$5 for children 10
and under
718-393-7505

CAST

Yolanda Batts, Justin
Birdsong, Jim
Dimarino, Sevan
Greene, Shad Olsen,
Julie Rees, Doug
Chitel, Lois Hart, Joe
Pace, Stephanie
Wilberding

BOOK

William Finn &
James Lapine

MUSIC & LYRICS

William Finn

DIRECTOR

Brian Swasey

MUSIC DIRECTOR

Jeffrey Campos

PRODUCING COMPANY

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New Brain itself, and it's a very worthy evening, marked by solid voices and a remarkable group of songs that soar, search, and satisfy.

Astoria Performing Arts Center

It's in those songs that *A New Brain* is at its best. The story itself—Gordon gets sick, is diagnosed, faces his fear of death, and lives to tell the tale—is somehow both familiar and strangely structured. But any show that contains such a range of heartfelt, hilarious, and gorgeous songs as "I'd Rather Be Sailing," "Gordon's Law of Genetics," "And They're Off," "A Really Lousy Day in the Universe," and "I Feel So Much Spring" (to name but five) is by definition astonishing.

Brian Swasey, who serves as APAC's artistic director, guides the evening with a sure hand. His staging is swift and economical, and with the exception of a sluggish opening, it moves well and includes some notably clever choreography for a large cast on a smallish stage. He is fortunate to have Joe Pace in the lead role of Gordon, the composer who begins the show kvetching about his job writing songs for a children's TV show and ends up realizing life is beautiful, even (and perhaps especially) in New York City. Pace has a wonderful voice and tackles the role with gusto. Stephanie Wilberding offers solid support as Gordon's friend and coworker, Rhoda. The entire cast is nothing less than game, and frequently more than that, and, as mentioned, they all sing beautifully, though Yolanda Batts tends to overwork her numbers unnecessarily. Musical director Jeffrey Campos leads a spirited and accomplished quintet of musicians.

And the show looks terrific, particularly given the no-doubt-modest means APAC has to provide. Michael Kramer's set is both functional and inventive; Erik Michael's lighting is much more solid than the few instruments at his disposal would lead one to expect; and Jessa-Raye Court's costumes are spot-on, especially her design for Mr. Bungee, the tyrant frog host of the TV show where Gordon and Rhoda work.

For some reason, Campos has urged full-voiced singing of backup vocals, so oftentimes the lyrics are lost in group numbers; in fact, enunciation is often an issue, especially without microphones for the singers. More to the point, Swasey seems to be onto something when he stages "Heart and Music" as a fantasy sequence Gordon is seeing as he faces his illness; this is a fascinating approach to the material, and one wishes there might have been a similar tack taken with the rest of the score. However, these quibbles aside, there is still a great deal of satisfaction to be derived from APAC's spiffy production of *A New Brain*.

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