

Fun Home

Music by Jeanine Tesori

Book and Lyrics by Lisa Kron

Based on the Graphic Novel by Alison Bechdel

Court Theatre August 10 – September 14th 2024

Fun Home is a catchy title and with its origins in a graphic novel it is contemporary and appealing, so the audience settles into its seats for a rollicking good show. And a good time is had, but like the distorting mirrors at the funfair, this musical shows us alternative views of perceived reality. There is fun, but like real life it has an edge which makes the story compelling but often disturbing. To continue the fairground analogy, it is an emotional rollercoaster. The graphic novel's full title Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic sums it up perfectly.

This is the story of Alison Bechdel, the novelist's life, her seemingly normal upbringing in an ordinary family in suburban USA laid bare to reveal the complex truth of her difficult family circumstances. Alison dominates the stage, played by three different actors, marking signally important times in her life. The story bounces backwards and forwards in time as the three Alisons reveal the reality of their lives.

Even as a young girl Alison recognizes that she feels differently from her female peers. Unhappy wearing dresses and amazed by a butch delivery woman, she comes out as lesbian at university and as an adult graphic novelist uses her story to make sense of her difficult relationship with her father, a semi-closeted gay man who committed suicide when she was still young.

Kelly Hocking draws the eye to the novelist's studio, a high vantage point, as adult Alison overlooks the action of the play taking place in a meticulously maintained historic house, as she contemplates the events that unfold, drawing them, to help make sense of her story. Emma Katene, as the teenage Alison engages our attention and sympathy as she fumbles her way towards embracing her sexuality. Small Alison, Eden Taylor on the night I attended, is a radiant presence on the stage, commanding the audience's attention as she plays with her brothers and negotiates the complex relationship with her volatile and controlling father. Her work is remarkable as she manipulates the audience's emotions with the skill of an actor many years her senior.

Bruce Bechdel, portrayed by Michael Lee Porter, engages and repulses us by turn. He may be domineering and manipulative but he is trapped in his era, a time of secrets and subterfuge, while Alison can live her life openly and, one hopes, happily. In the role of Helen, Alison's mother, Juliet Reynolds-Midgely gains sympathy as she attempts to negotiate the difficult territory of her marriage.

Fun home is a musical, but one where the narrative is underscored by the music rather than consisting of large-scale set pieces. The sparkling band and the smart choreography give depth and emphasis to the moods created by the events portrayed.

Fun Home is not always fun, but it is beautifully acted, thought provoking and rewarding. The story and the characters will stay in my consciousness for a long time to come.

Robyn Peers

August 14th