NEXT TO NORMAL

MUSIC BY TOM KITT
BOOK AND LYRICS BY BRIAN YORKEY
MUSIC DIRECTION BY ANDRA VELIS SIMON
DIRECTED BY DAVID CROMER

Begins May 8th
Performed in the Alexandra C. and John D. Nichols Theatre
Dear Friends,

It is with great pride that we welcome back director David Cromer (Picnic, A Streetcar Named Desire and more) to Writers Theatre, to direct in our beautiful new building for the first time. Fresh off his 2018 Tony Award win for directing the exquisite production of The Band’s Visit on Broadway, David invites us to lean forward and engage with another uniquely moving musical to close our 2018/19 Season: Next to Normal by Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey.

Next to Normal is not your typical musical. Its subject matter, development process and path to the Pulitzer are not what you would ordinarily expect of a Broadway smash. But as you will soon learn, this groundbreaking rock musical touches on themes of family, mental health and the pressures to succeed in such an emotionally resonant way that it is difficult to resist being swept up in its compelling story.

In this issue of The Brief Chronicle, we will provide some context for David’s work as a director by recalling some of his greatest achievements in Chicago, New York and here at Writers Theatre. We will also review the provenance of Next to Normal, from a ten-minute musical sketch about a woman with bipolar disorder to a full-length award-winning musical with global impact. You will also find additional details about bipolar disorder, a brief history of how its treatment has evolved and why the stigma surrounding mental health issues can be so harmful.

Next, you’ll hear from the cast of Next to Normal about why live theatre—and this piece, in particular—is meaningful to them. We will also provide you with a wrap-up of this season’s annual tour of The MLK Project: The Fight for Civil Rights by Yolanda Androzzo, which completed its 13th year and has reached more than 80,000 people to date, coordinated by our incredible team in the WT Education department!

As the 2018/19 Season comes to a close, we are excited to remind you that the 2019/20 Season is just around the corner! The season launches in August with the highly-anticipated, in-the-round production of Into the Woods, the musical masterpiece by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, followed by Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, newly adapted by Sandra Delgado from the streamlined version that Michael created for Definition Theatre Company. We’ll also offer thrilling new plays in both theatres, including The Niceties by Eleanor Burgess and The Last Match by Anna Ziegler. The rollercoaster family comedy-drama Stick Fly by Lydia R. Diamond will keep you on the edge of your seat with its twists and turns, and the Chicago Tribune’s “Company of the Year” Manual Cinema will enchant you with Mementos Mori, as you experience a motion-picture created right before your eyes in real-time!

Subscriptions for the 2019/20 Season are available now—we hope that you’ll learn more and join us with a season package by calling the WT Box Office at 847-242-6000 or visiting www.writerstheatre.org. You won’t want to miss a moment!

Michael Halberstam
Artistic Director

Kathryn M. Lipuma
Executive Director
STATE OF THE ART

by Michael Halberstam, Artistic Director

If someone had sat you down eight or so years ago and told you that they were developing a hip-hop musical about Alexander Hamilton, you would have laughed and not believed them. This in fact was the reception Lin-Manuel Miranda experienced when he announced the project and performed a sketch of the production that was to come at the White House in front of President Obama and his wife Michelle. It is worth noting that at the conclusion of that presentation, the entire room leapt to their feet and cheered.

I am sure that a similar skepticism greeted book writer and lyricist Brian Yorkey and composer Tom Kitt when they first pitched the idea of Next to Normal. In the Wikipedia encapsulation of the show, it is cited as being about a woman facing “bipolar disorder and the effects that her illness and its management have had on her family.” The entry goes on to say that the piece “...also addresses the issues of grief, suicide, drug abuse, ethics in modern psychiatry and the underbelly of suburban life.” Sounds like a great evening at the theatre doesn’t it? And yet Next to Normal went on to be nominated for eleven Tony Awards, winning three in addition to claiming the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Why? Next to Normal has an enormous capacity to emotionally engage. I hear rumblings from time to time that audiences are tired of dramas surrounding dysfunctional families. The trouble with functional families is of course that they don’t make very good subject matter for drama. The nature of drama is the theatrical exploration of conflict, and the most personal relationship we can craft with drama is probably found in our own homes. Sophocles certainly thought so when he wrote Oedipus as did Shakespeare when he wrote Hamlet. Furthermore, like the most successful of such dramas, Next to Normal tackles undiscovered country in dealing with bi-polar disorder in a musical vernacular and it uses songs to lift the subject matter into as many hearts as are willing to open.

The stigma of mental disorders is still very much with us. There is a sense sometimes when we learn that someone is suffering from depression that they are displaying...
a form of weakness, that if they’d only try harder, they could change their mood and attitude, and that surely they can just take a pill and everything would clear up. These attitudes are often coupled with misogynist tropes when it comes to women, in particular—frequently we hear that they are just being hysterical or overly emotional. The reality is much more complex and ambiguous and challenging. Next to Normal takes us into the heart of a normal suburban home, Glencoe for instance, and opens up a brilliant and compelling conversation about a family dealing with the crisis and stigma of mental challenges and sears it right into our souls. We laugh, cry, mourn and celebrate as we ride through the mountains and valleys of familial strife and we take home an astonishing array of songs in our heart.

Last year, when I had a conversation with David Cromer, one of my most trusted colleagues and dearest friends, as he was triumphing in New York with his brilliant production of The Band’s Visit (for which he and the show would go on to win well-deserved Tony Awards and most recently a Grammy), we both acknowledged that mental illness had touched our lives personally and profoundly. I had myself stood upon the precipice of self-harm and contemplated making the jump. He, a good doctor, my best friend Scott Parkinson, my partner Jack and many in my life had helped me find an alternative way forward: life. We look for ways to echo the experiences we face in our art, and collaborating on Next to Normal seemed a superbly appropriate way of manifesting this conversation onstage.

David is one of the greatest directors of our generation. I have been following his art since I first became aware of him as a director. Perhaps a few of you will remember his first engagement with Writers Theatre back in the early days when he directed me in a one-man show about Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar Wilde’s much maligned and very damaged lover. I had been recommended him by Curt Columbus and thus began a friendship that endures to this day. David always makes me see a play I thought I knew with fresh eyes. When it’s my first experience with the play, I never forget the staging and I usually hold up subsequent productions to his in unfair comparison. That’s how it is for me, at least. If you’re seeing David’s work for the first time, it’s possible you won’t notice the direction because you’ll be too busy immersing yourself in the lives of the characters in this wonderful musical. I once heard him say that he believes the director’s job is to take the audience and the play closer and closer together and at the last minute, get out of the way so that they can meet. It gives me great pleasure to facilitate that process and introduce you all to Next to Normal. I hope you like each other.
Writers Theatre has always been a home of sorts for David Cromer.

Next to Normal will be the sixth production he has directed for the company, more than he has helmed at any other Chicago theatre. When asked what he remembers about working at WT for the first time, the director slyly but sincerely responds, “I got paid. I’ve worked for free so many times. It was not nothing when we were young and starving that the theatre was going to pay you. Going to where you were actually going to be valued was nice. [Working at Writers Theatre] has always been financially and artistically satisfying. You tend to go to a place where the value system is the same [as yours].”

Born and raised in Skokie, Cromer started directing in Chicago storefronts after dropping out of Columbia College. One of his first professional directing jobs was at WT in 1995, when he directed a production of Oscar Remembered at the Books on Vernon space, which starred Artistic

Pictured: David Cromer in Our Town. Photo by Marc Brenner. Photo courtesy of Marc Brenner.
Director Michael Halberstam as Lord Alfred Douglas, the lover of Oscar Wilde. He would return to the Bookstore to direct Booth by Austin Pendleton in 2000 and The Price by Arthur Miller in 2002. The latter production would win him a Jeff Award for Best Director.

Within a few years, Cromer became an established name in the Chicago theatre community and New York was beginning to take notice. Orson’s Shadow, a play by Austin Pendleton which had its premiere at Steppenwolf in 2000 under Cromer’s direction, was given an Off-Broadway run at the Barrow Street in 2005, again with Cromer at the helm. In early 2008, Cromer again took a Chicago production to New York. This time it was a new musical adaptation of Adding Machine by Jason Loewith and Josh Schmidt, which had premiered at Next Theatre Company in Evanston in 2007. The Off-Broadway production ran for more than five months and won four Lucille Lortel Awards, including one for Cromer as Outstanding Director.

However, it was a classic play, not a new one, that would forever transform the director’s career. After opening Adding Machine Off-Broadway, Cromer returned to Chicago to direct a revival of Thornton Wilder’s Our Town for The Hypocrites in the basement studio of the Chopin Theatre, in which Cromer would also play the role of the Stage Manager every night. The fresh approach Cromer took to such well-trodden material was extraordinarily powerful, and an Off-Broadway production of his Our Town opened in February 2009 at the Barrow Street Theatre, playing 648 performances before finally closing in September 2010. It remains the longest running production of Wilder’s play in history. Cromer won his second Lortel Award in a row for Outstanding Director, and also picked up an Obie Award for his Directing work as well. The success of Our Town led to two Broadway directing jobs, Brighton Beach Memoirs in 2009 and The House of Blue Leaves in 2011. Cromer was also named one of the 2010 “Genius Grant” fellows by the MacArthur Foundation for his work “reinvigorat[ing] classic American plays and illuminating their relationship to the present.”
In the midst of this rapid ascent to the top tier of American directors, Cromer still made time to return to WT. A few months before *Our Town* opened in New York in 2008, Cromer directed William Inge’s *Picnic* at Writers Theatre. With a design that put the audience right on top of the backyard between two homes in rural Kansas, the production was highly acclaimed, with Terry Teachout of *The Wall Street Journal* calling it one of the best theatrical productions he had ever seen. Two years later, in the summer of 2010, Cromer returned to Glencoe again, this time to direct *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. The production was an instant hit and became one of the most successful productions in WT history. Audiences were completely immersed in the world of New Orleans as the Kowalski home was painstakingly realized before them, with seating on all four sides of the stage, mere feet away from the actors. Such was Cromer’s celebrity at this point that even Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* flew in to review the production, calling it “the most uniformly well-acted production I’ve yet seen.”

In the intervening years, Cromer has continued to work steadily and successfully in New York, London and all around the country. His most recent career triumph began in late 2016, when he directed the world premiere of a musical by Itamar Moses and David Yazbek at Atlantic Theater Company. Adapted from a 2007 Israeli film, *The Band’s Visit* tells the story of an Egyptian police orchestra that comes to Israel to perform at an Arab cultural center but mistakenly goes to the wrong town and is forced to spend the night there. The Off-Broadway production was a hit, well-received by critics and audiences alike, and yet it seemed an unlikely candidate to transfer to a Broadway populated by much flashier and tourist-oriented fare. Nevertheless, a Broadway transfer opened in October 2017 and overcame all doubts, receiving universal acclaim and winning 10 Tony Awards, including Best Musical. Cromer was honored as the year's Best Director for his work bringing the musical to life. The production announced recently it will be closing in April 2019 after a 16 month run.

It’s only fitting, then, that in the midst of another great bout of success, Cromer has chosen to return to his home in Chicago to direct *Next to Normal*. This will be Cromer’s first time working in the new Writers Theatre building, despite being involved in discussions about the design of the space, but his understanding of the theatre’s mission is uninterrupted. When discussing *The Band’s Visit*, Cromer remarks that even though the musical was “playing in a big Broadway theater, the aesthetic was that the show was going to be clear, its shifts were going to be built, it was going to be very true to its word, and the hope was that the audience would lean forward. I couldn’t tell you which came first, whether I knew that was what I valued when I was young or whether I learned that at Writers or if we all learned it together or if certain artists and certain theatres just find each other, but that was the experience and I’m glad to be back.”
“Which of my feelings are real? Which of the me's is me? The wild, impulsive, chaotic, energetic, and crazy one? Or the shy, withdrawn, desperate, suicidal, doomed, and tired one? Probably a bit of both, hopefully much that is neither.”

—Kay Redfield Jamison, An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness

Diana, the mother in Next to Normal, has bipolar disorder. There are 5.7 million real people like her in the United States alone. Formerly known as manic depression, bipolar disorder is a mental illness characterized by manic periods of extreme elevated moods (highs) followed by depressive periods of hopelessness (lows). The “high” symptoms of mania consist of elevated feelings of energy. They include restlessness, euphoria, being easily distracted, lack of need for sleep, exaggerated optimism, recklessness or aggressiveness. The positive feelings derived from many of these symptoms may cause people to refuse to admit that they have a health problem. On the other hand, the disorder is also characterized by “low” symptoms of depression. These include sadness, loss of appetite, irritability, fatigue, chronic pain, hopelessness or thoughts of death and suicide. Science has yet to determine a specific gene that links to bipolar disorder. However, research shows that it can often be hereditary, and that trauma can trigger the onset of an underlying case of bipolar disorder. Typically, the disorder arises in adolescence or early adulthood.

Common treatments for bipolar disorder include psychotherapy and medication. Various forms of psychotherapy can provide useful information and help patients deal with emotional regulation and
manage their interpersonal relationships. As for medication, Lithium is the most common and accepted drug treatment, since it reduces the risk of suicide and self-harm amidst acute episodes. 3 For long-term medicating, mood stabilizers are prescribed, while antipsychotics are used for short-term episodes. Due to the “high” and “low” nature of bipolar disorder, antidepressants alone are not typically prescribed.

“I never shut up. I could be brilliant. I never had to look long for a word, a thought, a connection, a joke, anything.”

—Carrie Fisher

In addition to these widespread and conventional methods, there is another treatment that is used in extreme cases: brain stimulation therapy. The most widespread of these therapies is electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) which uses an electric current to treat severe mental health issues. ECT is typically used for treating severe depression but is sometimes used for other disorders including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Using ECT to treat bipolar disorder is deemed necessary when medication or psychotherapy fails, or when urgency is required, in cases such as suicide risk. ECT typically works quicker than medication, especially for older individuals. Side effects of ECT include headache, muscle aches, upset stomach, and memory loss. Memory problems typically affect recollection of the time around treatment, and usually improve after days or weeks, although some cases are more severe. 4

The late actress Carrie Fisher spoke openly about her experiences with bipolar disorder later in life. Describing her manic symptoms with bp Magazine, she said “I never shut up. I could be brilliant. I never had to look long for a word, a thought, a connection, a joke, anything.” However, through these symptoms she realized something was wrong. “When my mania is going strong, it’s sort of a clear path. You know, I’m flying high up onto the mountain, but it starts going too fast. I stop being
able to connect. My sentences don’t make sense. I’m not tracking anymore and I can’t sleep and I’m not reliable.” In another piece with the magazine, writer Jon Press describes one of the depressive symptoms as “want[ing] to make a hasty retreat, to head back home and climb into bed.” All in all, symptoms can vary from person to person just as degrees of the illness can. Everyone with bipolar disorder has experiences unique to them, which is why there is no “one-size-fits-all” cure.

Like most mental illnesses, severe societal stigma prevents many people from realizing that themselves or others have bipolar disorder and can even stop them from seeking help. The media often portrays mental illness incorrectly or in a negative light. Many myths about mental illnesses abound, such as that they make people violent, resist all treatment and that all symptoms of mental illness manifest in the same way. In reality, studies show that people suffering from mental health issues are actually much more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violent crime and can live healthy lives with the right treatment. Groups such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and Time to Change are dedicated to raising awareness and combating the stigma of these issues. People can help fight stigma by talking openly about mental health and educating themselves and others. Many people forget that mental health is just as important as physical health, so it’s important to treat the mind’s wellbeing as one would the body, as both can be susceptible to illness. Stories like Next to Normal that portray mental illness realistically are few and far between, which makes their educational and cultural value all the more important. ■

1 National Institute of Mental Health
3 Bipolar Disorder: A Guide for Patients and Families by Francis Mark Mondimore
4 National Institute of Mental Health

Pictured: (L-R) J. Robert Spencer as Dan and Alice Ripley as Diana at Arena Stage in Crystal City through January 18, 2009.
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SUNDAY SPOTLIGHT
This free one-hour event about the themes of the play begins at 11:30am, leaving you plenty of time for coffee or lunch before the 2pm Sunday matinee performance begins! Seating is limited, RSVP is required. Past audiences have discussed ghost stories and their legacies for The Hunter and The Bear with Randall Colburn, culture writer for The AV Club and Consequence of Sound, and dug into the legacy of the Leo Frank case in Parade with Rabbi Steve Lowenstein from Am Shalom.

Save the date for the Sunday Spotlight for Next to Normal on Sunday, June 2nd at 11:30am before the matinee performance.

FROM PAGE TO STAGE
Writers Theatre and select North Shore libraries and community partners are proud to present this series of special events, lectures and workshops designed to enhance your appreciation of the art. From Page to Stage is generously sponsored by Randy L. and Melvin R. Berlin. For an up-to-date list of new events, visit writerstheatre.org/fpts.

HELP IS OUT THERE: 10 COMMON MENTAL HEALTH WARNING SIGNS
Thursday, May 16 at 7pm
Hosted by Deerfield Public Library | 920 Waukegan Rd, Deerfield

Featuring: Mary Jouppi, President of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Lake County

With May being Mental Health Month, Deerfield Public Library will host this From Page to Stage event featuring Mary Jouppi, who will address concerns and questions regarding mental health challenges that families face in today’s world. RSVP at bit.ly/HelpsOutThere.
WT FILM SERIES: SILVER LININGS PLAYBOOK
For the third year in a row, we are excited to present this curated film series to complement our six productions. Join us for these special screenings and compare themes with the plays in our 2018/19 season. RSVP is requested, $10 admission. Tickets available at wilmettetheatre.com/writers-theatre.

Save the date for Silver Linings Playbook on Sunday, May 19 at 2:00pm. Hosted by the Wilmette Theater, 1122 Central Ave, Wilmette.

POST-SHOW CONVERSATION: THE WORD
Join us after every Tuesday evening performance (excluding First Week and any extension weeks) of every production in our 2018/19 Season for a 15-minute discussion of the play facilitated by a member of the WT Artistic Team.

POST-SHOW CONVERSATION: THE ARTIST
Join us after every Wednesday evening performance (excluding First Week and any extension weeks) of every production in our 2018/19 Season for a 15-minute discussion with actors from the production facilitated by a member of the WT Artistic Team.

PRE-SHOW CONVERSATION: UP CLOSE
Join us at 6:45pm in the Atrium before every Thursday evening performance (excluding First Week and any extension weeks) for a 15-minute primer on the context and content of the play, facilitated by a member of the WT Artistic Team.

SOCIAL HOUR AT WT
Remember that the WT Bar is open for an hour before and after our performances. You are welcome to enjoy a snack or beverage and discuss the play in the Litowitz Atrium, on our Grand Gallery Walk or on the Stephanie and Bill Sick Rooftop Terrace.
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“Is there something that your character experiences in Next to Normal or about the play in general that resonates with you or intersects with your life?”

David Schlumpf (Dan)

Next to Normal is one of those brilliant shows that reveals something new about itself every time I listen to it. As rehearsals approach and I begin to study the script more closely, it is the song “Better Than Before” that has struck me more than ever. In this song, Dan tries to remind Diana of their family’s most special moments and puts a positive spin on each memory, even though the memories aren’t as perfect as he paints them to be. “Here’s a flower from our wedding, it was such a sight to see! And the ceremony everything we’d hoped.” Dan’s daughter is quick to retort with the reality, “Um Dad, it was raining, it was Portland, you eloped. I mean, Portland?!” It’s a small exchange but such a charming one and requires the actor to create an imaginary memory of Dan and Diana’s wedding so that the audience can be inspired to summon memories of their own weddings (or ones that they attended) and thus be brought into the moment on stage. All of this to say that when I listened to the recording a few days ago, this moment shook me to tears. For the first time, I will not have to create an imaginary memory of a wedding because I will have just married the love of my life a few days prior to the start of rehearsals. As actors, we create so many imaginary moments on stage but it is always so special when life and art can intertwine and we can bring our own truth to the moment. So, if you see a particular twinkle in Dan’s eye when he talks about his wedding to Diana, now you’ll know why!

Alex Levy (Henry)

This show captures the sense of weight that accompanies a mental illness. So, here’s the scoop: I have depression and anxiety. I didn’t want these Wonder Twin illnesses, but I got ’em. As do a lot of people. And at their absolute worst, my bedroom was in ruin. Papers, books, clothes, office supplies, all in rubble as I tore that place up like a wolverine. I then fell to the floor, paralyzed: sweaty, achy, mouth ajar. And I couldn’t speak, only groans. I sounded like Charlie Brown’s teacher. My head felt like an iron vice was crushing my temples. My brain was TV static. This lasted hours. And guess what? It was all over a late homework assignment. And, guess what else? I continue to fight this side of me. I always will. And I’m not crazy for it. Next to Normal gives a voice to stories like mine.
Kyrie Courter (Natalie)
Natalie is a perfectionist that puts a lot of pressure on herself to be the best that she can be. I can 100% relate to that! As artists, I think we are conditioned to be hyper-critical of what we are producing and how we carry ourselves onstage. It took me a lot of time to realize that our imperfect, true selves leave us an opportunity to connect and show others that “perfect” is not necessarily the best option. Natalie also deals with feeling alone and overlooked a lot in the show, which I think a lot of people can identify with. I, too, connect with those feelings deeply. Thankfully, I am reminded every day that I have a community that loves and supports me and that it’s okay not to be okay sometimes.

Keely Vasquez (Diana)
“Everything is balanced here and on an even keel. Everything is perfect. Nothing’s real.” Those lyrics hit me hard the first time I heard “I Miss The Mountains.” Knowing something may cause pain, or potential suffering will not deter us from choosing it. A vital part of the human condition is our need to disrupt a ‘normal’ life to feel the highs and lows. The other thing that strikes me the most deeply is how differently we each deal with loss, grief, illness, tragedy...all of the unexpected turmoil in life.

Then, the phenomenon of how even if you aren’t dealing with any immediate pain, day-to-day life can be extraordinarily difficult for a lot of people, myself included.

Liam Oh (Gabe)
The power of Next to Normal lies in the fact that it intersects with everyone’s life in one way or another, whether they actually know it or not. Each and every one of us have struggled like Diana, or tried and failed to support like Dan, or felt the fallout of mental illness like Natalie and Gabe. And if it’s not in your house, it’s in the house next door. We’ve come a long way in our public acceptance of mental illness, yet the stigmatization of these disorders still permeates every aspect of society. Next to Normal shows that it’s okay to not be okay, all the time. Like Diana says, “You don’t have to be happy at all to be happy you’re alive.”

“In an increasingly digital world, why does live theatre still matter?”

David Schlumpf (Dan)
There is nothing like attending the theatre because only there can you feel the true resonance of the human voice as actors experience the greatest highs and lows of humanity. If you go to a movie or you watch a show at home on TV, the sound quality is always booming with huge bass that literally vibrates through your body as you watch. It’s a great sensation! But it’s only really one wavelength. Come to the theatre and listen to the extraordinarily powerful and cathartic music in Next to Normal and you will experience
octave upon octave of vibrations. Waves of music that have been adorned with powerful emotions by the actor on stage so that those lyrics can, literally, resonate within you. Have you ever been "moved" by music or a powerful speech? Come experience this show and then tell me that you weren’t literally touched by the story!

Alex Levy (Henry)
Live theatre is vital to our intelligence. It reminds us of who we are and who we could be. It puts us face to face with the world: a real, tangible thing in all its haunting, beautiful, and curious glory. I believe film and TV risk losing that tangibility. They provide a glossy, protective barrier (and in some cases CGI effects and explosions and shiny stuff) that keep us deterred from the truth; something theatre doesn’t need to do. Theatre is raw. Theatre is representative. Theatre is unforgiving. Theatre’s your best friend that spits out the truth and forces you to think. And that’s, ya know, pretty sweet.

Kyrie Courter (Natalie)
It’s one of the few places where people are unplugged and open to the world around them, and that leaves an opportunity for deeper connection and understanding of the world. Instead of focusing on the image that we create for ourselves, we realize that our community is so much bigger than just a screen and full of people that are looking to connect, just like we are. Theatre is constantly providing us with views and ideas that can challenge our own and can broaden our understanding of the human condition—as opposed to our supportive, one-sided bubbles on social media. Theatre is challenging and provocative, and no screen can replace that direct engagement.

Keely Vasquez (Diana)
To me, in this world where thoughts and photos are shared and edited with perfect filters it’s easy to have 5,000 ‘friends’ and still be terribly lonely. Live theatre—sharing air and connecting to stories—engaging with the 300 strangers and friends in the same room can be a holy experience.

Liam Oh (Gabe)
When I was five, I saw my brother fly. I mean, he was connected to some very indiscreet wires and almost hit a wall, but in that moment, magic was real to me. That community theatre production of Peter Pan changed my life in so many ways, and I know countless others have had identical experiences. I often ask myself, how is it possible to bridge the gaps that are everywhere today? Despite the fact that we have access to the whole extent of human knowledge at our fingertips, it seems like we grow farther apart as a society every day. But live theatre forces us to unplug for a little bit. It can puncture the self-made bubbles we construct, force us to confront uncomfortable truths we’d rather avoid, or bring us together when we’d rather be isolated. And most importantly, it makes us believe we can fly.
BETTER THAN BEFORE: THE MAKING OF NEXT TO NORMAL

By Andrew Agress, Literary Intern

How do you write a hit Broadway musical about mental illness?

The short answer is, it takes a long journey. The long answer is a story of curiosity, perseverance, revisions and a collective belief from a dedicated artistic team that this was a story that needed to be told. Even today, mental health issues are stigmatized in many societies despite the fact that so many people are affected by them, whether through their own illnesses or that of a loved one. Next to Normal portrays a family dealing with mental illness from various perspectives: those suffering from it, those with relatives suffering from it and those who fear they may suffer from it down the road. Odds are,
most people can relate to one or more of these perspectives, which helps clear the fog on why Next to Normal’s widespread success isn’t such a surprise after all. Never before had a Broadway musical tackled the issues of mental health in a way that brought stigmatized illnesses to the forefront. And yet, the journey to Broadway was a long one.

Next to Normal had its humble origins as a different show, and a much shorter one at that. Writers Brian Yorkey and Tom Kitt met in college at Columbia University, where they collaborated on a variety of projects. After graduation, they attended the Broadway Music, Inc. Musical Theatre Workshop in 1998 where they had to write a final project. Yorkey and Kitt knew they wanted to do something nontraditional and out-of-the-box. As the deadline loomed, the two still had no idea what they wanted to write about. But inspiration can strike at any time and from unlikely sources. One night, Yorkey was watching a news piece on NBC about electroconvulsive therapy, or electroshock therapy as it was formerly known. “I didn’t know that it was still practiced,” he explained in an interview with PBS. “I’ve come to learn much more about it but at the time it just sort of surprised me and really got me sort of thinking about the kind of person who would have to have that sort of treatment in their lives. And so I called up Tom and I said ‘what about a musical about a woman who has struggled with depression for her whole life and has to turn to ECT.’ Tom said, ‘Let’s give it a try,’ and off we went.”

Feeling Electric was the result, a ten-minute musical sketch about a woman undergoing electroshock therapy for bipolar disorder. Reactions at a workshop presentation ranged from surprised to genuinely affected, and a question arose: could this kind of material work as the basis for a full-length musical? In an interview with BroadwayWorld, Kitt explained that it was the number of people who were moved by the piece “that gave us the courage and enthusiasm to go forward and keep writing songs for it. Eventually, we kind of felt like that we said we weren’t going to finish writing the show, but that’s all we seemed to want to write.”

Yorkey and Kitt did shelve Feeling Electric for a time to pursue other paths. Kitt stayed in New York to work as a musical director and conductor, while Yorkey became the Associate Artistic Director of Village Theatre in Issaquah, Washington. Still, the duo kept coming back to the musical. In 2005, Village Theatre
hosted a workshop production of a more comprehensive draft of the piece. Using the feedback from the production, Yorkey and Kitt developed *Feeling Electric* into a full-length musical which was again workshopped later that year at the Barrow Theatre Group in New York.

While reworking the piece, the writers learned “a great lesson—that the show comes first.” (Tom Kitt, Interview with *BroadwayWorld*, Jan. 7, 2011). They initially held onto *Feeling Electric* and the songs they wrote for it, but soon realized that in order for it to grow into a full musical, changes had to be made. “[*Feeling Electric*] was about a lot of different things and, also, was meant to be a little fantastical,” explained Kitt. “And I think *Next to Normal* wanted to become something that was much more grounded and much more about this family.”

In 2008, the musical had its Off-Broadway debut under the new title *Next to Normal*. Directed by Michael Greif and starring Alice Ripley, Brian d’Arcy James and Aaron Tveit, the Second Stage production enjoyed commercial success, but opened to mixed reviews. Instead of transferring to Broadway at that time, the creators brought the musical to Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. later that same year for another production with most of the same cast to continue refining the script and score. The biggest change they decided to make was to tone down the more glamorous, “big theater” moments in the show. Several numbers got cut and replaced with entirely new songs. The Act One closer and the show’s biggest number, “Feeling Electric,” was removed entirely. Added at the top of Act Two was the mother-daughter song “Wish I Were Here.” The decision to focus
on the smaller, more intimate moments between the mother and her family resonated with audiences, launching the production back to New York, this time on Broadway.

On April 15, 2009, *Next to Normal* opened at the Booth Theatre to commercial and critical acclaim, thereby marking an end to its developmental journey and a new start to its widespread success. The entire cast from the Arena Stage run returned, as well as director Michael Greif. At the Tony Awards, the musical was nominated for 11 awards and won in the categories of Best Original Score, Best Orchestration and Best Performance by a Leading Actress for Alice Ripley’s portrayal of Diana, the mother of the family. *Next to Normal* also received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, becoming the eighth musical in history to do so (since then, *Hamilton* is the only other musical to win the award). Upon bestowing the award, the Pulitzer board described *Next to Normal* as “a powerful rock musical that grapples with mental illness in a suburban family and expands the scope of subject matter for musicals.” The Broadway production ran for almost two years, and also launched a national tour. The musical now continues to spread awareness of mental health issues through numerous regional and international productions from Oslo, Norway to Lima, Peru. While *Next to Normal* focuses on a suburban American family, issues relating to mental health and family can affect anyone, no matter where they’re from.

Aaron Tveit as Gabe, J. Robert Spencer as Dan, Adam Chanler-Berat as Henry, Jennifer Damiano as Natalie, (front) Alice Ripley as Diana and Louis Hobson as Dr. Fine at Arena Stage in Crystal City through January 18, 2009.
FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

WT Education celebrates 13th year of touring program The MLK Project: The Fight For Civil Rights

2019 marked WT Education’s thirteenth consecutive year of bringing history to life through touring educational program The MLK Project: The Fight for Civil Rights. Written by Yolanda Androzzi, this one-woman show follows a Chicago student named Alaya’s personal transformation through interviewing local heroes of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. Alaya uses her fists as an outlet for anger, but as she delves into the rich history and stories of the Movement’s Chicago roots, she discovers she can turn her “anger into action” and that her power is in her voice and her hip hop, not violence.

Mirroring Writers Theatre’s mission, each year The MLK Project invites thousands of students to lean forward and engage with this intimate, powerful and inspiring story about fighting with—and for—your voice.
The MLK Project 2019 Tour:

...reached approximately 7,130 students and teachers during 38 performances

...traveled to 30 schools across the Chicagoland area

...served 14 schools through Communities in Schools of Chicago, an organization that provides free programs and services for schools in underserved communities that address students’ unmet needs

...collaborated with 8 community organizations including the Chicago History Museum, the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, Old Town School of Folk Music, two juvenile detention centers and the DuSable Museum of African American History

...performed onsite at Writers Theatre for the second year in a row

To date, Alaya’s story—and the stories of the heroes she encounters—has been celebrated by approximately 83,000 students, teachers and community members across Chicago.
ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES

Writers Theatre is committed to making our Theatre accessible for everyone. We are proud to offer Access Subscriptions and the following services:

For People with Mobility Difficulties
- Accessible parking spaces along Tudor Court
- Drop-off lane by the building’s main entrance
- Accessible entrances to the building
- Doorbell at the main entrance to request assistance with the front doors
- Courtesy wheelchair to assist with entering the building and theatre spaces
- Wheelchair-accessible seating*
- Elevator Access to second-level seating, Grand Gallery Walk and Stephanie and Bill Sick Rooftop Terrace and Garden

*Depending on your preference, you may transfer into a theatre seat or request to have the theatre seat removed to remain in the wheelchair. When purchasing your tickets, please let the Box Office know if you would like the theatre seat removed.

For People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing
We are pleased to offer assistive listening devices in each of our performance spaces. Contact the Box Office with questions or for advance reservations. Assistive listening devices are offered free of charge.

In all of the performance spaces in our new theatre center, we have t-coil induction loop technology. For anyone with a telecoil built into their hearing aid or cochlear implant, by switching it on you will be able to hear our performances with additional amplification and clarity. Check with your audiologist for specific instructions on how to operate your personal telecoil-equipped device.
We are happy to connect you with scripts for our shows to read prior to your attendance. For details, review our Script Policy at writerstheatre.org/script-policy or contact the Box Office.

**For People Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision**
Large print programs are available at every performance at the Box Office.

Braille programs are available by prior request through the Box Office. Contact the Box Office at least two weeks prior to your scheduled performance with this request.

We can accommodate seating needs for guests with service animals. Contact the Box Office to request this accommodation.

**Open-Captioned performance:**
**Thursday, May 30 at 7:30PM**

For additional information on accessibility services and subscriptions, contact access@writerstheatre.org or 847-242-6005.

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**The Accessibility Fund is a gift of Doris Conant and the Conant Family Foundation.**

Box Office: **847-242-6000**
WT BAR

WINE

RED
Alpamanta Malbec.................................................................$9
Van Duzer Pinot Noir ............................................................$9
La Garrigue du Midi Cabernet Sauvignon.................................$10

ROSE
Ostatu Rosado ........................................................................$9

WHITE
Santome Chardonnay ..............................................................$9
Firelands Pinot Grigio .............................................................$9
Yorkville Cellars Sauvignon Blanc ..........................................$10

SPARKLING
Charles de Fère Cuvée Jean Louis Blanc de Blancs...................$12
Sgajo Prosecco .................................................................$9, by the glass/$36, by the bottle

Our beer and wine products are subject to change, please ask your bartender for an up to date listing of our current selection.
**BEER & CIDER**

Solemn Oath Snaggletooth Bandanda ........................................$6
Original Sin McIntosh Unfiltered .............................................$6
Two Brothers Domaine DuPage .................................................$6
Off Color Brewing Apex Predator ..............................................$7
Great Lakes Brewing Edmund Fitzgerald .................................$7

**LIQUOR**

A selection of Koval and other premium liquors

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**DESSERTS**

Assorted cookies ......................................................................$4
Assorted bars ..........................................................................$5
Ethereal Confections chocolate bar .......................................$7

**ADDITIONAL CONCESSIONS**

Coffee (Regular, Decaf) .........................................................$3
Rishi Hot Tea (Chamomile, Earl Grey, Peppermint) ..................$2
Soda (Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, Ginger Ale) .............................$2
Water ..............................................................................$2
CUSTOM COCKTAILS

Enjoy a custom cocktail from the WT Bar—specially created for each of our productions by Mixed metaPours!

RE-PRESSED FEELINGS

KOVAL GIN, TONIC, FRESH PRESSED LEMON LIME
FRESH GRATED GINGER
GARNISH WITH FRESH MINT LEAVES AND SPRIGS

All of our signature cocktail creations are designed by WT Cocktail Consultant Cheryl Rich Heisler & Mixed metaPours.

312-613-7499 | www.mixedmetapours.com
STAY IN TOUCH WITH WRITERS THEATRE
JOIN THE CONVERSATION!
#NexttoNormalWT

Share your thoughts on the show!

Take this survey about Next to Normal: bit.ly/WTN2N
Write a review of your experience on Yelp: bit.ly/WTonYelp

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Follow us on Twitter: @WritersTheatre
Follow us on Instagram: @writers_theatre

Check in to Writers Theatre on Swarm
Sign up for our email list to receive news updates, backstage stories, photos, videos and more: writerstheatre.org/email

Follow our company on LinkedIn: linkedin.com/company/writers-theatre

We look forward to hearing from you!
# NEXT TO NORMAL

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### Format Descriptions:
- **Private Event**
- **Post-Show Conversation**
- **Pre-Show Conversation**
- **Sunday Spotlight**