

BACKSTORY

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Inquirer.net

Rockin' on Broadway, next to normal



and Louis Hobson as Dr. Madden and Dr. Fine, the two doctors that treat Diana's illness—are wonderful.

Yes, *Next to Normal* isn't a feel-good Broadway show, but it does end on a note of hope and light. I left the theater knowing that things would get better for this family. No, they won't be normal, but "next to normal."

The production is running at the Booth Theater. For tickets and other info, visit www.nexttonormal.com.

Oh, by the way, the cast recordings of both these shows are available on iTunes.

NO VISIT to New York would be complete without seeing at least one Broadway show. At least, that's how it is for me.

My time in New York City last week was definitely very busy with a few meetings and plenty of friend-time. So although I wasn't able to see as many shows as I would have wanted to, I was happy enough to see two: *Rock of Ages* and *Next to Normal*.

5 Tony nominations

Rock of Ages started its life in Los Angeles in 2006, and then headed to New World Stages off-Broadway in October 2008. It finally made the move to Broadway in April of this year. It has won five Tony nominations: Best Musical, Best Actor in a Musical (*American Idol's* Constantine Maroulis), Best Director (Kristin Hanggi), Best Costume Design (Gregory Gale), and Best Sound Design (Peter Hylenski).

The show is set in the Bourbon Room, a club on the Sunset Strip in 1980s LA. It's a love story of a would-be rock star named Drew (Maroulis) and a would-be actress named Sherrie (Amy Spanger), and features wall-to-wall '80s rock songs by artists like Journey, Starship, Poison, Pat Benatar, Whitesnake, REO Speedwagon, Damn Yankees, and many, many more.

Scene stealer

As charming and talented as Maroulis and Spanger both are, the real scene stealer comes in the form of Lonny (Mitchell Jarvis). He acts as main narrator, moving the story along and keeping the audience abreast of all that's going on, all the while being pee-in-your-pants funny. A lot of the support cast is excellent, too: Wesley Taylor is hilarious as the Peewee Hermanesque Franz; Lauren Molina as Regina (its pronunciation rhymes with a female body part) who protests the possible destruction of the strip; James Carpinello as Stacey Jaxx is spot-on funny (and extremely hot... that six-pack is no joke!); and Adam Dannheiser is the embodiment of the '80s as owner of the Bourbon Room. Everyone in the cast is praiseworthy, from the ensemble to the principals, and I thought it cool that even the band was an equal part of the action.

Oh, another cool thing: drinks are served during the show. I went with one of my best girlfriends, and we had a couple of cosmos each while watching. I also brought my best head bang. (Yes, head bang, not headband.)

So, if you're looking for Nothing But a Good Time, go see *Rock of Ages* at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre. For tickets and other information, visit www.rockofagesmusical.com.

Unusual subject

Ready for something heavier?

Next to Normal is the story of a woman with bipolar disorder (among other things) and how this affects her family. Not exactly something you'd expect a Broadway musical to tackle, but that's exactly what it does, and beautifully.

Alice Ripley (a brand new Tony Awardee for Best Actress in a Musical) plays Diana Goodman, a wife and mother who is mentally unwell (bipolar disorder is but the tip of the iceberg). This change in her state of being comes after a most traumatic event in her life, the death of her 8-month-old son Gabe, who now haunts her in the form of a near 18-year-old ghost of a man (Aaron Tveit).

Directed by Michael Greif (best-known for *Rent*), with music by Tom Kitt and lyrics by Brian Yorkey, *Next to Normal* is smart, affecting and hilarious. However, I warn you—you'll need an entire box of tissue paper for the tears you'll shed watching Diana's life unfold.

The sets are simple—moving panels, scaffolding, a few pieces of furniture—in stark contrast to how complicated and messed-up Diana and her family are.

Alice Ripley gives a tour-de-force performance, nothing superfluous or unnecessary, as crazy as her character might be. She is beautiful from

start to finish, and you really root for her to get well. The rest of the cast—including J. Robert Spencer as Diana's husband Dan, Jennifer Damiano as their daughter Natalie, Adam Chanler-Berat as Natalie's boyfriend Henry,

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