

ENTERTAINMENT

'Small Town Story' examines fear, prejudice

Updated May 31;

Posted May 31



In the musical "Small Town Story," the question of a high school production's appropriateness splits the town and families. Here, Lois Patterson (Claire McClanahan) and daughter Alex (Ilana Gabrielle) have a tense moment. The musical is at the South Orange Performing Arts Center through June 10.(Spotlights



Photography courtesy of American Theater Group)

0

By Natalie Pompilio

For NJ Advance Media

The musical "Small Town Story" -- which will premiere at South Orange Performing Arts Center May 31 -- was commissioned almost a decade ago but the subject matter is particularly timely:

When the high school drama club announces an upcoming performance of "Rent," residents of a fictional Texas town clash over the appropriateness of the show's subject matter. The issue pits neighbors against neighbors, parents versus children.

But the characters soon come to learn that viewing the opposition in black and white benefits no one. It's a lesson that likely resonates beyond the theater.

"Most characters in our piece have shades of gray," said Sammy Buck, who wrote the musical's book and co-wrote the lyrics. "It's not just the polemic who's right and who's wrong. ... That's one thing we do as a country that gets us into trouble. We need to ask people why they feel the way they do."

Director Eddie Prunoske said the show is nuanced, as are people.

1

"Real art is about making people whole and human, and not monsters," he said. "Even if we disagree, most people are doing what they think is right."

The musical is based on real events, beginning with the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Rent," which centers on a group of artists living and struggling to get by in New York City. The Broadway show, which won the 1996 Tony Award for Best Musical, features same-sex couples, characters who are HIV positive or have AIDS, and recovering drug users.

In 2008, "Rent: School Edition" became available and ignited controversies in communities across the country. Some shows were canceled; others went forward after much debate. In light of this conflict, the non-profit New York Theatre Barn then commissioned and developed the project that became "Small Town Story."

"This still happens," said Brandon James Gwinn, who wrote music and co-wrote the lyrics for "Small Town Story" with Buck. He ticked off productions that have been surprisingly controversial -- such as "Legally Blond: The Musical" -- and questioned why others -- some theater classics with arguably objectionable elements, such as racism in "West Side Story" -- are given a pass.

Gwin also says communities could be approaching these issues from the wrong angle: "Rather than having big public fights, why don't we sit down and have a conversation?"



Actress Joanna Young plays the character of Inez, a woman who works at a church food bank and is close to many teenagers in the community, yet finds herself opposing the drama club.

"She gets upset when she reads the script. She doesn't feel it upholds the values the town should have," Young said.

"She fights the principal and the drama teacher and some parents and some students."

Yet she is not portrayed as a pure villain, Gwinn stressed.

"She tends to be everyone's favorite character because she's so complicated... She has a surrogate mother role to a kid in the show, who we learn is gay, as she has to reconcile her beliefs and positions while loving this child," he said. "In workshops, some people said they were almost mad that they love this conservative woman they disagree with."

The show's music gives a nod to its setting -- Texas -- and to the needs of the individual characters.

Buck, a Texas native, said some tunes have a "fiddle and violin feel in the orchestration that tugs at the string."

Gwinn, originally from Tennessee, said in some songs he was aiming for "national pop along the lines of Taylor Swift 10 years ago."

Young's Inez sings a song the actress describes as "anthemic, a big song with a contemporary feel rooted in church music."

1

"It reminds me of 'Seasons of Love' from 'Rent,' " she said. "It's great contemporary musical theater writing."

The show's coming-of-age element is brought home by songs like "Shine," which features three of the show's high school-age characters. They're questioning themselves and their feelings, their parents and their teachers. They're learning their lives are very different from those of the people who lived in the East Village in the 1990s, the setting for "Rent."

"It was so much fun to capture that adolescent 'I am so filled with emotions and hormones and I don't know how to deal with it' feeling," Gwinn said. "This is the real moment the score grabs you, and you can't leave your seat for the rest of the show."

Small Town Story -- A Musical about a Musical that Rocked a Community

South Orange Performing Arts Center

One SOPAC Way, South Orange

Tickets: \$25-45, available online at www.sopacnow.org.
May 31 - June 10.

Natalie Pompilio is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia. She can be reached at nataliepompilio@yahoo.com. Find her on

Twitter [@nataliepompilio](https://twitter.com/nataliepompilio). Find NJ.com/Entertainment [on Facebook](#).



Use of and/or registration on any portion of this site constitutes acceptance of our **User Agreement** (updated 5/25/18) and **Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement** (updated 5/25/18).

© 2018 Advance Local Media LLC. All rights reserved (**About Us**).

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Advance Local.

Community Rules apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site.

Your California Privacy Rights

Ad Choices

