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'Small Town Story' makes big splash at SOPAC

By: **JAY LUSTIG** | June 7, 2018

In 2008, a planned high school production of "Rent" in Rowlett, Texas, horrified some local parents and school board members, who objected to the references to drugs, homosexuality and more (even though this was the play's toned-down "school edition"). The school production was cancelled, but the participants presented a one-night-only concert version of it, anyway, at nearby Southern Methodist University.

This incident — and others like it, throughout the country, following the release of that school edition in '08 — inspired "Small Town Story," a musical that the American Theater Group is premiering at the South Orange Performing Arts Center through June 10.

It's a rich, provocative topic for a musical, and "Small Town Story" is a work of explosive power, as well as one that says something important about the state of our divided country without hitting you over the head with it. I highly recommend catching it while it is in South Orange.



PHOTOS BY LIANNE SCHOENWIESNER

Ilana Gabrielle stars in "Small Town Story" at the South Orange Performing Arts Center, through June 10.



Nick Siccone and Jacqueline Neeley in "Small Town Story."

Sammy Buck wrote the book, Brandon James Gwinn is responsible for the music, and they collaborated on the lyrics. One of the best things about their work is that they resist the temptation to make the characters who populate their fictional town of Speargrove, Texas one-dimensional stereotypes.

Alex (Ilana Gabrielle), for instance, is a sophisticated, big city girl — a student whose family has moved from Brooklyn to Speargrove — but she doesn't look down on Speargrove's down-home ways as much as you might expect her to. Her mother, Lois (Claire McClanahan), considers herself open-minded, but may have some deep-rooted prejudices, too.

Inez (Joanna Young) is a school board member who is unreasonably determined to stop "Rent," yet she has a warm, nurturing side. Larry (Stacey Todd Holt) is a parent who is dead-set against it, too, but you see his point of view, and can't really blame him.

Alex and Larry's son, Scott (Nick Siccone), are the main characters: Teenagers trying to figure out who they are, and who get caught up in the "Rent" controversy almost against their will. Caroline (Jacqueline Neeley), meanwhile, is the budding star of the "Rent" cast, and she knows it. Buck and Gwinn, characteristically, resist the urge to make her a joke — the preening high school prima donna — and give her some three-dimensionality, as well.

"Small Town Story" has some references to "Rent" itself. You see Scott and Alex (who play Mark and Joanne), for instance, doing a bit of their characters' tango together. But there are no actual "Rent" scenes and songs in it.

Yet the subtext is that the life-affirming, progressive spirit of “Rent” is spreading to this small Texas town. Buck and Gwinn were smart to include, in the second act, not just a fabulous, show-stopping solo number for Alex (“One Lone Star”) but an ensemble anthem about the power of art itself (“That’s What It Does”). The school drama teacher, Mr. Ford (Frank Paiva), also articulates that the way “Rent” grapples with, and doesn’t avoid, the realities of the modern world makes it even more essential for these kids.

All that said, I did find the ending of “Small Town Story” a little over-the-top in its sentimentality. It’s not that I object to a happy ending; it’s just that when things work out a little too neatly, I find it unrealistic and jarring. It’s always better, I think, to leave something dark, or unresolved, to ground the work in reality.

Especially when a musical, like “Small Town Story,” does such a good job of evoking the real world, with likeable but flawed characters dealing with the kind of familial and identity problems that anyone can relate to.

“Small Town Story” is at the South Orange Performing Arts Center through June 10; visit [sopacnow.org](https://www.sopacnow.org) (<https://www.sopacnow.org>).



The ensemble of “Small Town Story.”

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