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## New musical 'Henry Mann' rides '90s renaissance with charm on N.J. stage: review

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"The Evolution of Henry Mann" on stage at Fellowship Cultural Arts Center in Basking Ridge through Oct. 24. Lianne Schoenwiesner, Spotlights Photography





By [Patrick Maley](#) | [For NJ Advance Media](#)

Quaint and occasionally charming, the new musical “The Evolution of Henry Mann,” now playing at Fellowship Cultural Arts Center, feels in many ways like a ‘90s throwback.


An unlucky in love fella struggles to find the perfect gal in the big city despite his most earnest of commitments to the fairytale of a happy wedding. His best friend/roommate tries to set him up on perfect dates while struggling with her own relationship issues, and all the potential love interests have plenty of their own quirks: controlling and in therapy, nerdy Midwesterner with a unibrow, and so on. All this is set to a piano-driven score behind poppy songs about the challenges of dating in a modern world. Broken into episodes, the show would fit neatly into NBC’s Thursday night lineup between “Seinfeld” and “Friends.”



Our particular forlorn dude here is Henry (Ryan Gregory Thurman) who is greeted at the end of a year of weddings with the invitation to his ex-girlfriend's upcoming nuptials. Determined not to attend stag, Henry recruits his best friend Gwen (Shani Hadjian), rooming with him while she is on the outs with her wife, to help him find the girl of his dreams so he can show off his happiness at the wedding. First, he falls for Tamar (Bebe Browning), who is adventurous alluring, but maybe he shouldn't overlook Christine (also Browning), who is sweet and quiet, but what about the yoga-crazy neighbor across the way (Browning again), who might very well be the just right option in Henry's Goldilocks quandary? Meanwhile Gwen struggles to reconcile the sexual adventures of her newfound freedom with the lingering love she holds for the wife she cheated on.




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Moving the plot along on the Basking Ridge stage are songs like “What’s the Catch,” where Henry and Christine each wonder what hidden flaws undermine the other after a lovely first date, and “Low Expectations,” about Henry and Tamar trying to manage relationship desires. A three-piece on-stage band (Emily Cohn, piano/conductor; Katie

Chambers, cello; Meghan Doyle, guitar) performs Douglas J. Cohen's music with clean precision and occasional pep, and Dan Elish (book and lyrics) offers cheeky rhymes that carry the show's woe-for-the-modern-dating-scene theme from curtain to curtain.

There are some laughs and enjoyable performances here. Hadjian in particular finds room to land a solid punchline or two, and Thurman's haggard-but-hopeful Henry can be relied on for some self-effacing humor. Browning is particularly impressive in her shifting roles, using only slight changes to voice and mannerisms to paint fully distinct characters.

Perhaps Elish and Cohen are chasing the current wave of '90s renaissance by offering a "Sex and the City" knockoff, but "The Evolution of Henry Mann" offers little in the way of surprises or inventiveness. Rather than providing some sort of interesting variation on a very familiar theme, this musical leans fully into the comfort of readymade trope. Strange as it may seem, though, if Netflix and fashion trends are any indication, maybe a romp through '90s stylings is precisely what's on order for the fall of 2021.

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### ***"The Evolution of Henry Mann"***

*American Theater Group*

*Fellowship Cultural Arts Center, 8000 Fellowship Road, Basking Ridge*

*Tickets available online (<https://www.americantheatergroup.org/>), running through Sunday.*

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