

NEXT TO NORMAL

A Cardinal Stage Hit

by Laura Jesseph

Last weekend, Cardinal Stage Company wrapped up a wildly successful run of the rock musical *Next to Normal*. The play, written by Brian Yorkey with music by Tom Kitt, has won numerous honors including three Tony Awards and a Pulitzer Prize. When the Bloomington NAMI board (of which I am a member) heard that it would be playing here and that its subject was mental illness, we were concerned about how that tricky subject matter would be presented. Part of NAMI's role in the community is to help encourage understanding of mental illness and to fight the stigma surrounding it. So, when we saw the Broadway poster art of the play, which shows a woman in a dress and high heels with her head in an oven, our anxiety raised enough to send representatives to a rehearsal and a preview performance. Fast forward past three packed-house weekends and we're left stunned. NAMI was proud to cosponsor one of these performances. *Next to Normal* presents a family afflicted with mental illness. In this case, the mother, Diane, has a long-standing diagnosis of bipolar disorder. The play deals with her struggles while it presents each family member, husband, son and daughter, fighting their own demons. Their collective story is a backdrop in which to explore the many and complicated ways that mental illness can affect a family. Each member of Diane's family has opportunity to express his/her own confusion and disappointment and grief.

As a play, *Next to Normal* presents the drama and the tragedy, the heights and the dark depths that are the world of mental illness. It is neither trivial nor superficial. Randy White should be applauded for producing a play that deals with a challenging and complex subject - a subject emotionally charged not only for those who suffer from mental illness, but also for their loved ones. It is no easy task for actors to honor those complicated emotions, and any acting weakness would have destroyed that character's credibility. These actors carried their roles brilliantly, taking us with them and sucking our emotion to the surface.

As a musical, *Next to Normal* is a giant. I worried that a musical would not be able to do justice to the topic, but I couldn't have been more wrong. From the driving and rocking 'I'm Alive' to the sweet love song 'Perfect for You', the music carried the story and stimulated those nerve fibers that only music can. Dan Lodge-Rigal and his band were rock solid and held it all together. The singers were second to none.

As a vehicle for furthering the understanding of mental illness, *Next to Normal* made an important contribution. One in four of us will have a major mental illness in our lifetime. It is a near certainty that someone you know has a serious mental illness and you don't know it. We all need more knowledge, more understanding and more willingness to enter the conversation about mental illness. *Next to Normal* gave its audience a perfect opening into that conversation. To all who made the play happen, NAMI thanks you.

For those in the audience who have suffered from mental illness, the play can be almost unbearably intense. A warning might be in order.