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NYMF: Max Understood: The State of the Autistic

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Sunday, October 4, 2009; Posted: 01:10 PM - by [Duncan Pfister](#)

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Nancy Carlin and [Michael Rasbury's](#) musical *Max Understood* is unusual musical theatre fare: an imagined trip into the mind of an autistic child. Based on Rasbury's experiences with his own child, the show has the ring of authenticity. The play begins with a collage of sound as young Max ([Marlon Sherman](#)) takes it all in.

We are introduced to the busy Mom ([Mary Mossberg](#)) and Dad ([Michael Winther](#)) whose lives have become more hectic than they ever expected, from having to care for Max, who spouts out random pop cultural references that he enjoys, such as television commercials, The Wizard of Oz, Abercrombie and Fitch, and his electronic toy that has information about the American Presidents. They bemoan

their lot, wishing they could be normal. Dad is off to work, and as soon as Mom turns her back to get the laundry, Max is out the door, where he encounters a leaf-blower named Munc ([Everett Quinton](#)) and some neighborhood kids ([Ali Stroker](#), Ramiz Monsef, and [Tricia Burns](#)). Through Max's perceptions, Munc becomes an avuncular figure who dispenses advice and the kids become Pegasus, Albert Einstein, and a Mermaid. Meanwhile, Mom and Dad are looking for Max and begin to take on Max's characteristics and obsessions. He is eventually found, and the parents come to terms with their special child, understanding that he is normal.

The cast is great all around. The play is intentionally surreal, as directed by [David Schweizer](#), but though it has some very nice moments (especially Albert Einstein's loony hip-hop song about Mount Rushmore and Munc's setting of Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"), the play remains intellectually engaging without becoming emotionally so. This may be the fault of Carlin and Rasbury's lyrics, which, while appropriate for Max's fractured impressions of the world around him, seem banal when coming from characters like Mom and Dad. [Rasbury's music is fascinating and complicated, employing a New Age Ray Lynch/Philip Glass-like mode of repeating motifs, and incorporating sampled sounds \(washing machines, television commercials, Max's Presidential toy\); quite unlike anything I've heard at the NYMF before.](#)

Max Understood
By Nancy Carlin and [Michael Rasbury](#)
Part of the 2009 New York Musical Theatre Festival

45th st Theatre
354 West 45th St.

Remaining performances:
Sunday 10/4 at 1pm
Wednesday, 10/7 at 8pm


Tickets can be purchased online at www.NYMF.org
<http://www.nymf.org/Show-1216.html>
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Duncan Pflaster is an award-winning playwright (Winner, "Outstanding New Play", 2008 MITF award; Winner, Spotlight On Award, "Best New Play" 2005 and 2006), whose plays have been produced in New York, New Jersey, Georgia, and Florida. He also has been known to direct, write music, play the ukulele, and (if his arm is twisted) act.
[www.duncanpflaster.com](#)

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