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NYMF 2009: Roundup #1

Reviewed By: Dan Bacalzo and Patrick Lee · Oct 5, 2009 · New York

Max Understood, currently performing at the 45th Street Theatre, is clearly the result of a unique vision. More like a dramatic soundscape with characters than a conventional book musical, the uncompromising show -- under David Schweizer's direction -- often succeeds at vividly theatricalizing the experience of autism for its seven-year-old title character. Although the piece -- featuring music and sound design by Michael Rasbury, with lyrics by Rasbury and Nancy Carlin, who is also the bookwriter -- lacks dramatic tension, it's consistently fascinating.



Michael Winther and Marlon Sherman in *Max Understood* (© Caleb Wertenbake)

A wordless, attention-grabbing scene begins the show as young, autistic Max (a compelling Marlon Sherman) has what seems to be a seizure-like episode while surrounded by everyday aural stimulation. The ticking of a clock, the tapping from a laptop keyboard, the revving motor of a leaf blower: ordinary sounds combine in the opening musical piece (called "Noise Symphony") to create an increasingly surreal soundscape that approximates how the child hears the world. Soon, we're seeing how Mom (Mary Mossberg) and Dad (Michael Winther) struggle with Max and his special needs -- even the simple routine tasks of getting him dressed, fed, and on his school bus are nerve-wracking.

If the show suggests a dramatic arc it belongs to Max's parents -- their frustrations soon give way to panic when they discover that the boy has fled the house -- but the 70 minute one-act barely tells that story. Instead, it's mostly comprised of Max's benign adventures as he wanders around the neighborhood. The scenes -- ably peopled by Everett Quinton, Ramiz Monsef, Ali Stroker, and Tricia Burns -- lack conflict but succeed at honoring Max's capacity for imagination as he interprets the world.

The show's electronically-based score is atypical for musical theater but immediately proves appropriate and expressive for this subject matter. Except for an upbeat rap number, the score is cohesive despite putting electronic music to a variety of purposes, from the tone poems for the parents to the more conventionally structured songs for the supporting characters.

-- Patrick Lee

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