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## Max Understood

This is one of the shows in the 2009 New York Musical Theatre Festival. After Max escapes the apartment that he shares with his loving but overwhelmed parents, his world will never be the same again. This innovative "sound-scaped" ½ musical is the transformative odyssey of a 7-year old autistic boy, exploring how the need to communicate can bridge an unintelligible chasm. Paving the way are a leaf-blowing philosopher, a string theorist, Pegasus, a mermaid, and all the presidents of the United States.

**nytheatre.com review**

**Case Aiken** · October 1, 2009

I went fairly blind into *Max Understood*. I do this often; usually to prevent hype or preconceived notions about the topic or genre from manipulating my ultimate reaction to the piece. Once the lights go up I try to dissect the work and grasp what I am being presented with. In this case, the phrase "Autism, The Musical" came immediately to mind and I was worried that the show would dwell on the common portrayal of the condition, **but I was pleased to find deeper layers than the base cliches.**

This musical, showing now as part of the 2009 New York Musical Theatre Festival, attempts to highlight the tale of both the titular character, Max, a young boy with autism, and his parents, who are struggling to connect with their son. After setting the stage as to the status quo that the characters have been living under, the momentum of the musical kicks off when Max wanders outside without his parents

**VENUE**

**45th Street Theatre**

**OPENED**

September 28, 2009

**CLOSES**

October 7, 2009

**RUNNING TIME**

1 hour, 20 minutes  
No Intermission

**TICKETS**

**MORE INFO**

· [Company Website](#)

**CREATORS &  
ARTISTS**

**Cast**

Marlon Sherman, Michael Winther, Mary Mossberg, Everett Quinton, Ali Stroker, Ramiz Monsef, Tricia Burns

**Lyrics By**

Nancy Carlin and Michael Rasbury

**Music By**

Michael Rasbury

**Book By**

Nancy Carlin

**Director**

David Schweizer

**Choreographer**

Ryan Kelly

**Lighting**

Justin Townsend

**Sound**

Michael Rasbury

**Costumes**

Clint Ramos

**Sets**

Caleb Wertenbaker

**Stage Manager**

Matthew Compton

**Music Director**

T.O. Stewart

I.O. Sterrett

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and gets lost. We are then shown the adventure of Max finally exploring the outside world, but experiencing it with the iconography of the obsessions shaping his world, set against the desperate search by Max's parents for their son. The Max side of the story depicts disparate elements of his interests being contorted into a *Wizard of Oz*-like fantasy world, which has some of the most delightful points of whimsy, especially when compared to the much more palpable sensations of self-doubt and guilt that are highlighted in the parents' tale.

The music by writers Nancy Carlin and Michael Rasbury is perfectly functional. There aren't any show-stopping numbers, but it works very well throughout. Particularly effective are the scenes where music and sound effects are used to create the cacophony that makes us sympathize with the distressed conditions of the protagonist. The staging by David Schweizer is very interesting, with smart uses of props and set elements for multiple purposes, and the choice to keep the actors mostly on stage allows for several moments where characters are looking for people who are standing right in front of them. Performances are good, particularly the young Marlon Sherman as Max, which must be a very challenging role. Also of note is Ramiz Monsef as the obsessive intellectual, Albert, as well as Michael Winther and Mary Mossberg as Max's parents.

Overall, *Max Understood* provides an interesting approach to dealing with the issue of child autism, one that is growing substantially of late in the public consciousness. It highlights good performances and fascinating subject material without being overly pandering, though some of the numbers could be trimmed and the restraints required of staging a musical under festival conditions can be felt at times.

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