

ARTS EVENTS

Close to Home

Ground Floor Theatre invests *Fun Home* with the level of care that makes this musical memoir movingly familiar

BY TREY GUTIERREZ

Considering how often adaptations of beloved literary works miss their mark (cough, *Dark Tower*, cough), *Fun Home* is a rare treat. The full-length musical adaptation of Alison Bechdel's sardonic, unflinchingly honest graphic memoir of the same name does little to water down the painful truths of its source material, making it perfect fodder for a company as ambitious as Ground Floor Theatre.

Fun Home follows Alison, a 43-year-old cartoonist, as she uses art to extract meaning from vivid memories of spirited adolescence, sexual discovery, and a complex relationship with her closeted, domineering father. The show's basic premise (as well as its darkly irreverent tone) is perhaps best encapsulated by the blunt, clunky caption the artist assigns her sketch at the show's top: "My dad and I both grew up in the same small Pennsylvania town, and he was gay and I was gay. He killed himself, and I became a lesbian cartoonist."

In the musical, Alison is portrayed by actors of three different ages, with the show's non-linear narrative guided by "Adult Alison," played here by Austin improv staple Sarah Marie Curry. Onstage for nearly the entire performance, Curry's Alison strikes a sort of omniscient presence, watching knowingly from her drawing board as reflections of herself as

a naive, spunky 10-year-old (Mariela Denson) intertwine with those of herself as a frantic, wide-eyed college freshman (Taylor Flanagan). Experiences which at the time seemed downright confusing to Young Alison or unbearably frustrating to Middle Alison inspire sobering revelations within their adult counterpart – revelations skillfully communicated through Curry's command of subtle facial expressions and body language.



FUN HOME
Ground Floor Theatre,
979 Springdale #122
www.groundfloortheatre.org
Through Dec. 22
Running time: 2 hr., 5 min.

While three separate actors portraying a character's life journey is nothing groundbreaking, the keen attention to detail with which director Lisa Scheps approaches this dynamic is quite refreshing. Despite Middle and

Adult Alison not once making eye contact, Curry and Flanagan's fluid blocking and reactive line delivery effortlessly convey a single entity, while maintaining more than enough variety between their performances to imbue the character of Alison with a believable depth.

Scheps' eye for character continuity is also evident in the emotional foundation laid by eighth-grade theatre prodigy Denson, who portrays Young Alison with an admirably mature understanding of the impact her experiences impart to her older selves. Denson's emotional maturity not only brings dramatic weight to "Ring of Keys," Young Alison's show-stopping musical celebration of self-discovery,



The three faces of Alison: (l-r) Adult (Sarah Marie Curry), Young (Mariela Denson), and Middle (Taylor Flanagan)

it also enables actor Jim Lindsay to reach dizzying emotional highs in the demanding role of Alison's father, Bruce. As a result, the duo's painfully imperfect father-daughter relationship is intensely realistic and moving.

As Alison's college girlfriend Joan, deaf actress Sandra Mae Frank – a Broadway veteran best known for her involvement in Deaf West Theatre's Tony-nominated revival of *Spring Awakening* – delivers a warm, confident portrayal that serves as a perfect foil to Flanagan's charmingly manic Middle Alison. Conversely, Flanagan's adept ability to build upon Frank's American Sign Language-delivered dialogue creates refreshingly sincere chemistry that's unattainable via spoken word. Supertitles projected onto the stage backdrop provide a written translation of Frank's ASL, though relying solely on these captions can rob Frank's scenes of their well-crafted intimacy – especially when the projections have trouble keeping up with Flanagan and Frank's organic energy.

This issue, however, is lessened by la Ensterä's masterful set design. In keeping with the theme of Alison's utilitarian rebellion against her father's obsession with lavish outward appearances, Ensterä has crafted a minimalist, uncluttered set that fits the show's setting of the past not as it was but as it's oft remembered, leaving little in the way of distractions from the cast's powerful stage presence.

No doubt a casualty of its chosen medium, *Fun Home*'s stage adaptation loses some of its source material's measured style. Regardless, the level of care that Ground Floor's cast and crew have invested in this production highlights just how true the musical remains to the spirit of Bechdel's memoir. Kept intact in Ground Floor's *Fun Home* are the types of hurt, frustrations, and emotional complexities that make Alison's story at once heartbreaking, empowering, and, perhaps most of all, familiar.

THEATRE



OPENING

A COOL YULE: SWINGIN' HOLIDAY CABARET Enjoy an evening in which this swingin' cabaret warms your holiday heart with the songs of Andy Williams, Elvis, Frank Sinatra, Sugarland, Michael Buble, Peggy Lee, and more – as performed by your favorite **TexARTS** stars, directed by **Susan Finnigan**. (Wanna really live it up? Get a VIP pass to the holiday party on Dec. 16.) Dec. 14-21. Thu.-Sat., 7:30pm; Sun., 5pm. **TexARTS**, 2300 Lohmans Spur, 512/852-9079. \$43 and up. www.tex-arts.org.

BETTER MR. BURNS Yes, this is that **Anne Washburn**-scripted, *The Simpsons*-go-postapocalypse brilliance that delighted audiences at St. Ed's a few years ago, now presented by a cadre of UT theatre students under the direction of **Khrístián Méndez Aguirre** to "address a significant blind spot in contemporary American theatre: the intersection of environmental and social justice." And we've got more on the production on p. 24 of this very issue. Dec. 14-17. Fri. & Mon., 7pm; Sat.-Sun., 2 & 7pm. **Oscar G. Brockett Theatre**, Winship Drama Building, 300 E. 23rd. Free. www.bettermrburns.org.

EBENEZER HIGH: A MODERN TEENAGE CHRISTMAS CAROL A 17-year-old Ned Scrooge rediscovers the magic and true meaning of Christmas in this classic tale, adapted and directed by **Monica DeSouza**, featuring the **Bee Cave Youth Players**, and raising funds to benefit post-9/11 wounded and ill veterans. Sat., Dec. 15, 3 & 7pm. **Lakeway Activity Center**, 105 Cross Creek. \$10.

CABARET AT THE LEVEL LOUNGE This intimate lounge party from **Natalie George Productions** serves up the pre-holiday sounds of torch songs and American standards, featuring the dreamy voices of **Graham Weber** and **Carrie Rodriguez**, with **Micah Motenko** on piano and **Michelle Keffer** as your master of ceremonies. Sun., Dec. 16, 8pm. **Level Lounge**, 210 W. Riverside. \$18-45. www.nataliegeorgeproductions.com/cabaret.

A TUNA CHRISTMAS The **City Theatre** company takes on Joe Sears and Jaston Williams' classic about holiday antics in the third smallest town in Texas, with **Scot Friedman** and **Rick Smith** handling the many roles and **Robyn Conner** directing. Dec. 20-Jan. 5. Thu.-Sat., 8pm; Sun., 3pm. **Trinity Street Theatre**, 901 Trinity, 512/524-2870. \$15-25 (\$10, Thursdays). www.citytheatreAustin.org.

CLOSING

THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD This **Rupert Holmes** musical adaptation of Dickens' final narrative comes, through infrastructural battles recently won, to **Austin Playhouse** there in the ACC Highland complex, with a star-studded cast under the direction of **Don Toner**. Through Dec. 15. Thu.-Sat., 8pm; Sun., 5pm. **Austin Playhouse**, ACC Highland, 6001 Airport, 512/476-0084. \$19-38. www.austinplayhouse.com.

WE ARE PROUD TO PRESENT The full title of this show is **We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, From the German Südwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915**. It's **Jackie Sibblies Drury**'s "stunning, self-referential theatrical collage" that engages with abominable history to tackle the subject of racism and the theatre community's own (sometimes self-serving) attempts at engaging with this subject. Is it a serious show? Absolutely. Will parts of it make you laugh your ass off? Probably – but this work's arch hilarity can also cut like a machete. Bonus: That (award-winning) **Liz Fisher** directs a fine cast for **Street Corner Arts**. Through Dec. 15. Thu.-Sat., 8pm. **Hyde Park Theatre**, 511 W. 43rd, 512/479-7529. \$17-25. www.streetcornerarts.org.

ONGOING

A CHRISTMAS CAROL: CLASSIC RADIOCAST The players of the fictional KPNF radio station re-create Dickens' cherished masterpiece in this **Nathan Jerkins** adaptation, with all the characters

CHRON EVENTS EVERYWHERE YOU WANT TO BE IN AUSTIN
AUSTINCHRONICLE.COM/EVENTS