

Dear Evan Hansen - a global phenomenon and how Broadway celebrates its millennial audience



Followed the world-renown Hamilton - the hip-hop-infused rap musical about the Founding Fathers of America, Dear Evan Hansen is the next star at the box office that tells the story of adolescent struggles in the age of social media.

Before making its home in Toronto at the Royal Alexandra Theatre this March, Dear Evan Hansen has caused a stir as the Broadway production swept six out of its nine nominations at the Tony Awards. Grossing over \$88 million, the show is in high demand, filling theaters every night with young audience members, who carry playbills, merchandise and wait eagerly for the show to start while softly singing Pasek and Paul's widely-acclaimed score.

Dusting off the classic look of Broadway musical theatre with jazz hands and extravagant dance numbers, Dear Evan Hansen is a breath of fresh air that joins in the new wave of popularity for contemporary musicals. The musical tells the universal story of a socially anxious teenager and the common struggles of growing up: isolation, loneliness, depression, and self-doubt. It also speaks to the pain of parental loss, as well as the grief parents feel when they fail to reach their children.

With a simple set design and a small cast consisting of eight actors, the show's story is told through catchy pop- and rock-infused tunes that take its audience on an emotional rollercoaster, making them laugh one moment and choke back tears seconds later. Its music is raw, real and as uplifting as it is heartbreaking, which effortlessly resonates with the audience. It is no surprise that the musical went on to become a world phenomenon, especially among the younger audience. "Young people are seeing themselves represented and spoken for in a way that isn't common. If you are 17 years old, you don't see yourself on stage in 'Hamilton,' 'Groundhog Day' or 'Cats,'" says Will Roland, who plays Jared Kleinman in the show. "There's a level of engagement and enthusiasm coming from our audiences, especially for the young ones for whom it's not just a play. It's a big event in their lives that they continue to talk about and listen to after they leave."

The looming theme of social media is clearly seen in the high-tech, multimedia stage with screens projecting every tweet, photo, and status update from a variety of social media platforms. The story of Dear Evan Hansen also proves how easy things can spiral out of control online, with amplification from social media that makes the general public feel the need to participate in the narrative of a story that they don't fully understand.

Ben Platt's poignant portrayal of Evan is undoubtedly a major contributing factor to the success of the show. From "Waving Through A Window" to "Words Fail", the actor perfectly delivers the ups and downs of Evan's feelings, from one extreme emotion to another. His performance exposes raw pain just as much as that of Rachel Bay Jones. Jones, who plays Evan's mother, wins the audience with her heart-wrenching rendition of "So Big/So Small", which expresses the guilt and sadness her character feels as a single mother. As Evan sings the final notes, muffled sobs can be heard throughout the theater as the entire show comes to a halt. The audience has been taken on a journey of self-discovery, in which the teenager found love and acceptance that spring from a deceptive lie, which becomes even more destructive when the lie collapses and falls. From then, the audience watches Evan as he picks up his pieces from the crumbled reality he now faces and grows stronger as an individual.

Following its tagline "You Will Be Found", the show ends with a gentle note and a universally uplifting message: "Dear Evan Hansen, Today is going to be a good day. And here's why: because today, today at least you're you and that's enough". Undeniably moving and undoubtedly sensational in its own simplicity, Dear Evan Hansen is a musical for those who once questions whether they matter and it stands as a reminder to them that they are enough. The show connects people, allowing its audience members to easily find pieces of themselves from not just Evan but other characters' inner struggles and be reminded that they are not alone with whatever challenges they are facing. With a book by Steven Levenson and tracks written by Oscar-winners Benj Pasek & Justin Paul, Dear Evan Hansen marks a major milestone in Broadway's successful transformation to contemporary theatre and brings upon a new era of musical theater.