

## Generation Gaps: "john & jen," at the Green Room

Written by Mike Schulz

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I hadn't heard of the two-person musical *john & jen* until it popped up on St. Ambrose University's schedule of studio-theatre productions for the 2006-7 season, as a project for director Scott Peake and music director Tyson Danner. I'm guessing a lot of you hadn't, either.

And I still hadn't heard even a second of the show's score when it was announced as a springtime offering at the Green Room, with Danner - the venue's artistic director - directing *and* music directing. I'm guessing a lot of you hadn't, either.

But I'll also guess that, if you were lucky enough to catch one of the Green Room's

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performances of *John & Jen* (the show ran from May 29 through June 1), you might never forget it; not only did Andrew Lippa's and Tom Greenwald's touching, charming,

*really*

smart musical feel like an absolutely perfect fit for its venue, but Sarah Ulloa and Ryan Westwood gave the kinds of performances that make actors

*legendary*

in this area. (At least among fellow theatre fans.) Both are about to enter their senior years at St. Ambrose. Just go ahead and book tickets for the school's 2008-9 theatre season

*now*

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*John & Jen*'s first act finds its adoring, titular siblings pulled apart by contrasting attitudes towards the '60s and the dark shadow of an abusive (unseen) father; the second act, which climaxes in the '90s, finds the sister single-handedly raising a son named after his deceased uncle, who perished in Vietnam. There's a lot more to it than that, of course, but the heart of *John & Jen*

*& Jen*

is very simple - the show is all about the wonderful, maddening complexities of familial love, and how ghosts of the past have the tendency to affect us long into the future. It's an inexhaustibly huge theme that Lippa and Greenwald attack with vigor, and the key to their musical's success, it seems to me, lies in their decision to fashion it as a musical with only two performers.

Consider what we might've been deprived of if they *hadn't* made that decision. The Act II Jen christens her child with her brother's name, and it would've been moving - and ironically funny - enough to watch the son turn on his mother in ways that reminded you of the Act I squabbles between the siblings. But you feel a gut-level pain when, in Act II, Westwood turns on Ulloa in ways that the actor - as a different character - did in the previous act, in a different era. Ulloa's Jen is watching the past return to her not just temperamentally, but

*physically*

; to Jen, her son's tirades are as inseparable from her brother's as the name they share. Act II's "Baseball" number, in which the young John sings of wanting his mother gone forever, is pretty hilarious, but it also

*hurts*

, because the actor singing it is the same actor that Ulloa, as Jen, loves so much. (You want to shake the kid and shout, "Be

*nicer*

to her, you little jerk!") Through its shrewd, two-person casting,

*John & Jen*

ensures that its audience, like Jen herself, is continually haunted by John's death.

As much as I adore Lippa's and Greenwald's achievement, I'm not going to pretend that it's a

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flawless piece of work, because while *john & jen* is very sweet and very earnest, there are times when its sweetness and earnestness come off as abject simplicity and contrivance. In addition to boasting some rather obvious lyrics, the Act I sibs are too neatly placed into opposing ideological camps for the sake of an Act II catharsis; I never quite believed the brother's and sister's battle during their first-act reunion, as it felt more like a dramatic necessity than a character-driven inevitability. And in one scene, Act II goes off on a strange tangent, when the actors are asked to play TV interviewers in mock talk-show bits that provide exposition and easy laughs and little else. (*john & jen* was written in the mid-'90s, and this odd dip into Sally Jessy Raphael/Ricki Lake/Maury Povich territory feels like an unnecessary dig at the era's burgeoning talk-show foolishness.)



The show's authors, though, do far more things right than wrong. With a bare minimum of spoken dialogue, *john & jen's* plotting is lucid and compelling, and the songs are uniformly impressive; there wasn't one I was hoping would end, and a few numbers, especially Westwood's summer-camp anthem "Bye Room" - with its catchy "do-doot-doot

-doot-doot-do-doot" refrain - were almost gleefully enjoyable. And Lippa and Greenwald are smart enough to know when their sentimentality is reaching its breaking point, and act accordingly; Act I's "Christmas" number is a real heartbreaker, yet when it's reprised in Act II, the song becomes a hilarious ode to parental dismissiveness.

Danner clearly loves the piece, and admirably stayed out of its way; his directorial choices were strong and simple, particularly his staging of the deceased John singing to his sister from under a red down-light. (Designer Tristan Tapscott's unobtrusive effects, throughout, were splendid.) After a magnificently smooth Act I, in which one song flowed effortlessly into the next, there were a few moments in Act II when the rhythm was impeded by one too many breaks for applause - the audience would have ovated the finale *more* than enough to make up for not clapping earlier - yet overall, Danner's staging was exceptional, and made wonderful use of the

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rectangular platforms in Jovon Eberhart's spare set design. (At different times, the center-stage block was used - and always used

*well*

- as a crib, a couch, a bed, and, aided by a cleverly employed American flag, a coffin.)

By now, I'm sure you've gleaned just how difficult *john & jen's* acting challenge must have been. Yet the joy of Ulloa's and Westwood's performances stemmed from just how

*easy*

they made them look. No one who's seen the pair in other area roles could have been unprepared for their stunning, always pitch-perfect vocals, or even by their forceful dramatic (and comedic) presences, but the exquisite subtlety of their work here took even this longtime fan by surprise.

The duo was unquestionably convincing as both sets of *john & jen's* relations, and without engaging in any overt histrionics - only occasional

*fortissimo*

singing - their characters' passions, and their heartbreaks, were always deeply felt; Ulloa and Westwood continually played off one another with the naturalistic ease that (one would think) only comes from years of shared, frequently combative acquaintance. It was

*thrilling*

watching these performers in action, and my only true complaint about the Green Room's

*john & jen*

is that so few of you likely had the chance to see it for yourselves. The show's actors carried an entire production on their backs for two hours, and when they finally took a bow on Saturday night - as the audience leapt to its feet as if on springs - they looked ready and willing to entertain us for

*another*

two hours. I, for one, would have happily stuck around for the performance.

For information on the Green Room, visit ( <http://www.thegreenroomtheatre.com> ).