JAN. 13 - FEB. 7, 2016 | RITZ THEATER
345 13th Avenue NE, Minneapolis
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Advance Press
Michael Elyanow and Jeremy B. Cohen are quite a theatrical team: Elyanow is a playwright and erstwhile song composer; Cohen is a seasoned director and is currently in his sixth season as producing artistic director at the Playwrights’ Center in Minneapolis.

They’re also a married couple with a son in grade school. And they’re Jewish, which makes them of particular interest to readers of this publication.

Since these two creative types have been in town for quite a few years now, why is it that they’re suddenly coming into focus for Jewish audiences? The project is Theater Latté Da’s world premiere production of Elyanow’s “play with music,” Lullaby, which opens on Jan. 13 at the Ritz Theater in Minneapolis.

Lullaby was a big hit with fans of Latté Da’s NEXT 20/20 program, its major new work initiative in which audiences are able to preview the company’s upcoming musical presentations while they are still works in progress.

The show is described as a comedy/drama about a widowed young mother who, haunted by the death of her husband, forms an unlikely friendship with the songwriter she hires to teach her to play lullabies for her infant son. And, of course, the characters are all Jewish. But why?
“The characters spoke to me as I was writing the play and were revealing themselves to me as being Jewish,” Elyanow explained. “It’s not essential that they’re Jews, but it makes sense that they are.”

He feels that there’s a certain intimacy and linkage that is unique to Jewish families, something that he relates to growing up Jewish in Somerville, Mass.

“You know, they’re all complicated,” Elyanow said.

And the music?

“This is not a musical in the Broadway sense of the word, where characters break out and sing to move the story forward,” he said. “Here, there are other reasons for the songs. I’d call this a ‘play-sical.’”

Elyanow is not a trained musician. He has an MFA in theater from Northwestern University; he shied away from acting after discovering that he’s “a much better storyteller on the page than on the stage.” He’s self-taught on the guitar, and noodling around with it to create lullabies for his son may be the genesis of the songs he wrote for this show.

While not writing for Theater Latté Da or places like the Hartford Stage Company or the Manhattan Theatre Club, Elyanow dedicates himself to teaching television and screenwriting at Carleton College and Hamline University.

Prior to coming to Minneapolis for his job at the Playwrights’ Center, Cohen served as associate artistic director/director of new play development at Hartford Stage from 2003 to 2010, where he directed several premieres. Other directing credits include productions at Actors Theatre of Louisville, Kansas City Rep, Mixed Blood, Repertory Theatre of St Louis, Royal George, Steppenwolf Theatre; and workshops at O’Neill Playwrights’ Conference, New York Stage and Film, Pasadena Playhouse, Denver Center, and Beautiful Things at Latté Da in 2012.

He has received numerous directing awards, a NEA/TCG Directors Fellowship and a Northwestern University grant for his play 12 Volt Heart. He directed the 2014 world premiere of an off-Broadway musical by singer/songwriter Jonatha Brooke called My Mother Has Four Noses, to raves from the New York Times.

Since Lullaby had been in the works in different forms for some 10 years, it fit well into Latté Da’s new focus on musicals. Artistic Director Peter Rothstein fell in love with the script and was pleased that Cohen and Elyanow came as a package to deliver it to the stage. This was a perfect reason for Rothstein to bring Cohen back to Latté Da after his successful show there in 2012.

“The play has a Jewish ethos about it,” Cohen said. “It beautifully explores the intersection of two women’s lives of great transitions… and great hopes.”

Cohen and Elyanow invite the community to explore that ethos with them and the actors, to enjoy the music and take home a new lullaby or two for their kids or grandkids.

***
Annie Enneking is a long-time presence in Twin Cities theatre and music scenes, where she acts, sings and choreographs fights and violence for productions. **LULLABY** is a brand-new show brought to life at Theater Latte Da that features all-original, alternative rock music. In it, Enneking plays Thea, the strong-willed, local, has-been, celebrity rocker turned bar owner who discovers the true meaning of friendship while reconciling haunted pasts with co-star Adelin Phelps' character Cassie.

**LULLABY** also is the first world premiere in Theater Latté Da's major new work initiative, **NEXT 20/20**, a five-year endeavor aimed at developing 20 new musicals or plays-with-music and shepherding many of them to full production.

Enneking graciously took time from her busy calendar to share more about both the show and herself in this 6 Questions & a Plug:

**Let's start with the story - tell me more about the plot of LULLABY.**

Enneking: **LULLABY** is a romantic-comedy-musical with tragic underpinnings. It's about a friendship between two women who are managing different kinds of grief, one of whom has moved back in with her dad. It's kind of about family in its many forms: who you're born to, who you choose, who chooses you, etc.

**Who is Thea? Can you talk about your character development with this never-before explored character?**

Thea is a kind of hard nut to crack, but once you get to her center she's loyal as all get out and will love you hard and protect you. She's a dedicated musician and songwriter who owns a dyke bar, and hosts an open miki night so the voices of the young LGBT folks in her community can be heard. She has a lot of compassion, but is a tough love kind of person: she is very much from Boston in that way. Kind of rough and tumble, but heart of gold.
Your character Thea is a musician and you are, as well. Can you talk about developing this new play and the music -- it's all original/new -- what has that been like for you?

I love working with music. It's been great to learn new songs and chord-types I'm not familiar with. I love how the songs support an element of one plot line in the play we don't see, but hear about and then really access through the music.

What is it like developing a new piece like this one? Has it changed a lot since you began rehearsals?

The piece has shifted quite a bit over time, as I understand it. I know there were a few workshops of the piece getting it to where it is now. I couldn't participate in the most recent workshop of it because I had broken my jaw and it was wired shut. It has changed some in the course of the rehearsal process. There's been some streamlining, and some structural stuff has been addressed, as well as trimming in terms of character development in relationship to the length of the play. Like, do we really need the character to say that? Have we heard that in some form in a different place in the piece? It's fun to be in a room with really smart people who are trying to wrestle a play into form.

James Eckhouse (“the dad from 90210”) joins you on stage in this production, which may be a new element for Theater Latté Da. Does having a "celebrity" actor in the show change or enhance the production for you as a local actor, and do you expect he'll draw people to the show that may not have come otherwise?

Though I recognized James right away, I didn't know why, because I didn't watch much TV in that era. The thing about James is that he would enhance any production he's in because he (like Adelin Phelps and David Darrow) is a phenomenal actor. Any theater would be lucky to have him, celebrity or no.

Tell me a little about your background and what shows we've seen you in before, as well as about your training.

I've been part of the Twin Cities performing community for about 35 years. I originated a bunch of roles at The Children's Theatre when I was a child, including Pippi Longstocking and Mary Lennox (THE SECRET GARDEN); I played Alice in ALICE IN WONDERLAND, there, as well as other parts. I was then a dancer and toured and performed nationally with Danny Buraczeski's JAZZDANCE, and Shawn McConneloug and Her Orchestra. As an adult actor I've done a lot of work that I've found challenging and wonderful, including the title roles in MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN with Frank Theatre, HEDDA GABLER at The Southern Theatre, GOD SAVE GERTRUDE with Workhaus Collective, and played the fierce Lee Miller in BEHIND THE EYE at Park Square. I really enjoyed playing the nurse Annie in The Jungle's IN THE NEXT ROOM, because it gave me a chance to play someone who was really understated and who did not have a lot of social status and was not at all in contact with her strength. I'm usually called to play really strong women, women who know what they want and who go for it, so it was a real nice gift, getting to play her. As for my work in violence, I recently helped craft the attempted rape in EXTREMITIES with Dark and Stormy productions, as well as the fights for AN OCTAROON at Mixed Blood, HENRY IV with Ten Thousand Things, and TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD at the Guthrie. I trained as an actor and a dancer for most of my life. My interest in stage combat is the marriage of those two passions, I would say. I'm also really proud of a music performance event I made with my collaborator friend Samantha Johns called WHAT I WANT NOW I WILL WANT LATER. It was a beautiful and violent meditation on the mythology of Sirens.
I always end with a plug for what's next: what will you be in in the coming year?

The thing I'm most excited about is that I'll be releasing two albums this year. One is with my band, Annie and the Bang Bang. I'm attracted to super heavy indie power pop, but also to a sort of grungy, mountain-blues kind of thing. I like the energy of rock, and I really get to experience that with my band. The other album, "Lyndale and 24th," is a mellow-groove love letter to the experience of being in your 20s in Minneapolis. I found myself writing songs about when I was a really free adventurous person who loved and made memories with other free adventurous people. Life, to me, is about having a body at a particular place and time. Where were we? What was on the record player? Which drugs were involved? How did the sun look near the end of the party? I've recently been filled with dread, this feeling I'm going to die soon, but it may just be that I'm having the lived experience of my life flashing before my eyes. I've been writing about true things, things from my life, and just making them rhyme. It sounds stupid when I put it that way, but it's really simple and beautiful and I can't wait to release the album. Best thing I've heard as a response to these songs was from a friend who said he was walking around Uptown and had a flash of a memory, but realized it wasn't from his life, it was from mine.

As an actor, I'll be working with Trista Baldwin and Jeremy Wilhelm on a new work about Gertrude Bell with Workhaus Collective called EYE OF THE LAMB. I will also be doing LASSO OF TRUTH with Carson Kreitzer and Leah Cooper as part of Walking Shadow's season. I'll be in Kira Obolenski's THE CHANGELINGS with Ten Thousand Things Theater, and will be developing work with Skewed Visions. Additionally, Samantha Johns and I will likely get up to some mischief. As crafter of violence I'm excited to be choreographing fights for Theater Latté Da, The Jungle Theater, the University of Minnesota, and the Guthrie.

More information:

LULLABY - A World Premiere Play With Music by Michael Elyanow
Directed by Jeremy B. Cohen
Music Direction by Peter Morrow
Featuring: David Darrow, James Eckhouse, Annie Enneking and Adelin Phelps

Venue: Ritz Theater (345 13th Avenue NE, Minneapolis)
Tickets: $23- $37
Single tickets and season mini-subscriptions are on sale now at latteda.org or call 612-339-3003.
The spark for Lullaby, Michael Elyanow’s new play with music, came more than a decade ago when his young son had trouble at night.

“I’ve been singing lullabies to my son since he was six days old,” he says. “When he was two, he would never go to sleep. That is where the original germ of the musical came from.”

That was a decade ago. So what happened in the 10 years between that germ of an idea and the first production, opening this week at the Ritz Theater under the auspices of Theater Latté Da?

“That was a very different play. You have those plays where you say, ‘I love it, but it is completely wrong.’ I put it away for what I expected to be a year. Then 10 years go by,” Elyanow says.

The show came back to life through Theater Latté Da’s Next 20/20. Elyanow learned of the workshop series through his husband, Jeremy Cohen, who runs the Playwrights’ Center. Cohen also took on the role as director of Lullaby.

The piece is presented as a “play with music” as opposed to a traditional musical. There is music woven throughout the piece, but the characters aren’t breaking out of our world to sing.
“There are reasons for people singing,” Elyanow says. “Part of it is about a widowed mom whose husband used to sing all the time around the house. Part of the show takes place in their living room. The other part is at a lesbian bar’s open-mic night. Nobody just breaks out in song.”

Elyanow compares *Lullaby* to *Once*, where the music is woven into a story about a band coming together to make music. The tone of *Lullaby*, which he describes as “buddy comedy about a lesbian and a straight woman,” is quite different.

The different characters also have different styles. On one side there is a lesbian singer-songwriter whose story centers on a rock ‘n’ roll sound. On the other is the late husband, who plays folk as his music of choice. In the middle is the wife, who hires the singer to teach her how to play guitar so she can continue to share the gift of music with her young child.

Elyanow has a pair of terrific musicians in these roles. Annie Enneking plays the singer-songwriter, while David Darrow plays the dad. Adeline Phelps and James Eckhouse round out the company.

“Through this crazy rehearsal process with all of the transitions from one scene to the next, it is great having someone of David’s caliber [as a musician] there. That’s especially true for a new play where we are still trying to find the language of it. It is great to have musicians like Annie and David. They know that language,” Elyanow says.

That flexibility has been important throughout the rehearsal process. “I am always surprised that there is more work to be done. Every time I think I am done, David will have a suggestion. Jeremy will have a suggestion. It is the worst best thing when someone picks up something that needs to be fixed and I know it needs to be fixed. It is good to be working with super smart people,” Elyanow says.

**IF YOU GO:**

*Lullaby*

The show is in previews Wednesday through Friday; and opens Saturday through February 7

Ritz Theater

345 13th Ave. N.E., Minneapolis

$23-$37

For tickets and more information, call 612-339-3003 or visit online.
Artistic inspiration doesn’t always strike in the way we think it will. It can come from anywhere—even from your insomniac two-year-old who refuses to adhere to any sort of sleep schedule.

Such was the situation playwright Michael Elyanow found himself in 10 years ago. Elyanow and his husband were living in North Hampton, Massachusetts, and their two-year-old son was going through a phase. Namely, an I’m-not-going-to-sleep phase. To get him to sleep, Elyanow would sing him lullabies. He’d done it since they adopted him at six-days-old, and it was the only thing he could think of that might help.

At the time, Elyanow was also teaching at Northwestern University in Chicago, which made for a hefty commute. “I was traveling back and forth, and at some point I thought, God forbid, what if something happened to me: who’s going to sing my kid lullabies and get him to sleep?” Elyanow says. “So that’s kind of where the idea [for Lullaby] came from. And also, P.S., it was written from my own state of ‘I can’t sleep because this child won’t go to sleep,’ so all of it was this huge mess.”
Whether it was derived from the residual buzz from many a sleepless night or just his writer’s brain making the most of a less-than ideal situation, Elyanow ended up with the germ of the idea for *Lullaby*: a play-with-music about a widowed mom with a two-year-old who won’t sleep. To fill the void left by her musically inclined husband, she seeks out a lesbian singer-songwriter to teach her how to play lullabies.

This isn’t your typical musical, though. People don’t break into song, there are no impromptu dance breaks; in *Lullaby*, people are singing for a reason. “There’s a guy who’s singing to his kid because that is what he’s doing,” Elyanow explains. “There’s music in his life. And there’s music in the lesbian singer-songwriter’s life. And that’s the reason they’re singing.”

*Lullaby* got its first reading 10 years ago at the Hartford Stage, but was an entirely different play then. (The play today “is probably about 7% of what it was 10 years ago,” Elyanow says. “And I’m a 10-years-better writer now—I hope!”) Then, last spring, Theater Latte Da artistic director Peter Rothstein chose the work as part of the company’s *NEXT 20/20* initiative: a new-works program that seeks out musicals and play-with-music to develop.

Jeremy Cohen, Elyanow’s husband and the producing artistic director at the Playwrights’ Center, had heard that Rothstein was looking for something that “wasn’t quite a musical”—something that pushed the limits of a traditional musical—and encouraged Elyanow to show him *Lullaby*. Rothstein liked it, and gave Elyanow a month to polish it before it went into a month of workshops: live readings for an audience who, following each reading, would give feedback. That was last March and April. This weekend, less than a year and lots of rewrites later, the show is finally getting its world premiere at the Ritz Theater.

The story of *Lullaby* takes place half in a Boston dyke bar at open mic night, and half inside a suburban family home. The set blends the two scenes, so that the characters can move organically from one place to another, and the music—while very different in genre and context (lyrics for Thea, the lesbian singer-songwriter, are from out LA rocker Garrison Starr; those for Craig, the deceased father, are from the folksy, alternative guitarist Christopher Dallman)—flows together, carrying with it the stories of the people involved with each scenario.

“This play is a bit of a beast in that it’s part concert and part play—you’re kind of getting a two-in-one deal,” Elyanow says. “I didn’t know if it would work. I didn’t think that it was going to be a play about how music affects every facet of life and why it’s important, but that’s kind of what it taught me. That’s what I discovered in the workshop.”

Another reason *Lullaby* resonates with Elyanow is the opportunity it gave him to put characters together that aren’t typically seen on a stage: namely, a straight woman and a gay woman. “I feel like I haven’t seen that—ever,” Elyanow says. “And, spoiler: They don’t fall in love.” He laughs. “It’s about two people haunted by their pasts and finding a way to move forward together.”

This idea of pushing the limits of what theater can and should be is nothing new for Elyanow. In fact, it is the driving force behind all of what he writes. “The tricky part is knowing what theater can do, and exploring and exploiting that, and expanding on the boundaries of what theater can do,” he says. “I’m always thinking of what can you do in the theater that celebrates what theater is. There’s a communal aspect that’s alive and vibrant and not literal. When you see TV shows and movies, what you see is what you see. That’s not always the case in theater. People can talk through walls and talk across spaces and it doesn’t feel fake or forced, it takes on a completely different meaning. I love that.”
Lullaby is in previews January 13 through January 15, and opens January 16. It runs through February 7.
Ritz Theater, 345 13th Ave NE, Minneapolis
$23–$37
www.theaterlatteda.com
The picks

Starts tonight (Wednesday, Jan. 13) at the Ritz Theater: Michael Elyanow’s *Lullaby*. Hoping to learn to play lullabies for her infant son, a widowed young mother takes guitar lessons from a local has-been rocker turned bar owner. Together, they bond over tricky chords and haunted pasts. Part of Theater Latté Da’s ambitious *NEXT 20/20* series – a five-year initiative aimed at developing 20 new musicals or plays with music, and bringing many to full production – this world premiere features Adelin Phelps, Annie Enneking, David Darrow and James Eckhouse (*Beverly Hills 90210*), with original music by Elyanow, Garrison Starr and Chris Dallman. 7:30 p.m. FMI and tickets ($23-$37). Previews tonight through Friday, opening night Saturday. Ends Feb. 7. Strong language, mature adult situations, brief partial nudity.

Photo by Joe Dickie
Annie Enneking as Thea, David Darrow as Craig and Adelin Phelps as Cassie. Theater Latté Da’s *Lullaby*
At this moment, it is difficult for director Jeremy B. Cohen to separate his personal and professional lives.

For starters, he is directing Theater Latté Da’s world premiere of the play-with-music, *Lullaby*, which was written by his husband, Michael Elyanow. In this case, the distinction between a musical and a play with music is that nobody suddenly bursts into song. The songs, by Elyanow, Chris Dallman, Curt Schneider and Garrison Starr, occur only when the characters would play music.

“Separate from the fact that I sleep with the guy, I’m excited because we don’t have a lot of Twin Cities writers who have multiple plays of theirs happening in succession,” says Cohen, 42, of Elyanow, whose *The Children* opens in September at Pillsbury House Theatre. “That people can see these two incredible and incredibly different plays of Michael’s in one year is amazing.”

Then, there’s the fact that their son, Milo (the name comes from *The Phantom Tollbooth*) is in the play, kinda. His influence goes back to a previous Elyanow play directed by Cohen, *The Idiot Box*.

“I was directing the world premiere of that in Chicago, which overlapped with when we decided to try to adopt. They told us the process would take four years but we put in our paperwork and, 10 days after that, we got a kid,” Cohen says. “So that rehearsal process was when our son was 4 to 5 months old. It
was a pretty crazy time. My assistant on the show was very busy because we were taking turns with rewrites and rehearsals and changing the kid and feeding the kid.”

A lot of that showed up, two years later, in Elyanow's initial take on Lullaby, in which two women bond over lullabies. One is a grieving widow (Adelin Phelps) who would like to learn to sing to her 2-year-old; the other (Annie Enneking) is a rocker who retired without having made it big and who gives the mother lessons.

“There is a kid in the play, a 2-year-old. When Michael wrote the original version, our son was 2, so there was a lot of insomnia and diaper blow-outs and all the many joys of parents. So our son holds a little place in the show even though he’s now a teenager and if I talked about any of this with him, he’d be like, ‘Pop, that is so embarrassing,’ ” Cohen says.

Then, there’s the fact that both Cohen and Elyanow are so excited about Lullaby — which grew out of Latte Da’s Next 20/20 program to develop new musical theater works — that it’s hard to leave it at the theater, despite their best intentions.

“Last night, we got home from rehearsal and it was 11 and we both had gotten up at 6 that day to take our kid to school, so were practically falling asleep. But we were also really energized by the run-through that night, so we said, ‘OK. Let’s stay up and talk about rewrites until midnight and figure out what we’re going to do tomorrow. Then, we can go to bed,’ ” Cohen recalls.

The rules of the personal/professional relationship, in other words, are fluid: “It’s generally just establishing good-spouse boundaries, like, ‘Oh, you want me to read your play? Should I be, “Honey, it’s amazing,” or do you want some notes this time?’ I just have to know which conversation I’m getting into.”

Cohen says it has been exciting for him and the four-person cast, which also includes David Darrow and James Eckhouse (also known as the dad on Beverly Hills, 90210), to explore Lullaby, which he says is typical of Elyanow’s work in that it can go from hysterically funny to deeply moving in an instant.

“You can’t go half-measures on this thing. You have to go all the way to the mat with it and, without fail, every designer and every actor is doing that. It’s really exciting. Being in that (rehearsal) room over the last couple of weeks, it’s felt less like I’m directing a play and more like we’re all building a piece together,” Cohen says.

As the widowed mother, Phelps has been a crucial element of the piece.

“She’s playing a young widow who has a 2-year-old and also hasn’t gone to sleep. She has intense insomnia. She’s also wrestling with the ghost of her husband throughout the whole play and I’m just watching Addie dig so deep the last couple days,” Cohen says. “It’s my second play I’ve done with her and I’m just blown away.”

But he won’t be able to stick around and marvel at her work for long. Cohen, who is also producing artistic director of Playwrights’ Center, leaves the day after Lullaby’s opening to direct a play, then returns to do Le Switch at the Jungle in June.
All of those jobs will be made easier by the fact that Cohen and Elyanow’s son has become much more self-sufficient in the last decade. Or, as Cohen puts it, “No more diapers. Except on stage.”

Still, as Cohen’s answers to our 10 questions reveal, many of the best times come when they’re all together:

Q. Where is your favorite place to be?

A. I have two, wildly divergent favorites. One is on my couch with my kid and my dog, snuggled up, reading a book or talking about the world. The other is in tech rehearsal (the grueling rehearsals where lighting, sets, costumes and performers are all gathered). I love tech because it’s where everyone is brilliant. As a director, if you’ve done your job right, you’ve gathered this group of artists and unleashed their brilliance and tech rehearsal is that magic crossroad where everyone’s brilliance meets the urgency of the thing that’s about to happen.

Q. What would you do if you had a million dollars?

A. It’s dorky. I would create a system of health care for playwrights.

Q. What’s the best thing about your job as a director?

A. Collaboration. I hate when people talk about it but this was happening just last night. Even in the middle of a run-through, it felt like three different voices, all singing together: Mine, the actors and the designers. Amazing stuff came out of that conversation.

Q. When did you know you wanted to be a director?

A. I was standing at the back rail of Hartford Stage as a teenager, watching From the Mississippi Delta, and — I don’t even know how to talk about it. It was just so clear to me that helping choose the stories we tell and the power of those stories, especially from voices that aren’t normally heard or listened to, was how I wanted to spend my life.

Q. What are you thinking about when you begin a new job?

A. The very first thing is always, “How do we want to tell this story?” From that point, it’s, “Great. Who are the right designers to tell the story? Who are the actors? How will we connect with the audience?”

Q. Who would play you in a movie?

A. If I had my druthers? Janelle Monae. It’s, “Who’s the coolest person in the entire world that I want to be?”

Q. What was your first job?

A. I worked, under the table, at a pharmacy when I was 14. My total OCD behavior really kicked into gear when I learned about micromanaging a store.

Q. What’s your motto?
A. One day at a time.

Q. Who do you most admire?

A. The artist Daniel Alexander Jones.

Q. What’s the scariest thing you’ve ever done?

A. Truly, the scariest thing I have ever done was get sober 22 years ago.

IF YOU GO

What: *Lullaby*

When: Through Feb. 7

Where: Ritz Theater, 345 N.E. 13th Ave., Mpls.

Tickets: $37-$23, 612-339-3003 or latteda.org

Chris Hewitt can be reached at 651-228-5552. Follow him on twitter.com/ChrisHMovie.
There is a great range of work opening on Twin Cities stages this weekend. Theater Latté Da is premiering a new musical, Ten Thousand Things is resurrecting an old one. Loudmouth Collective has a quirky two-man show and Children’s Theatre does that one better with a solo performance by a celebrated New York performer.

**Lullaby**

Latté Da brings this piece forward from its new-work program *Next 20/20*. Written by Michael Elyanow, it’s described as a play with alt-rock music. Jeremy Cohen, producing artistic director of the Playwrights’ Center, directs with a cast of four.

The story is about a young mother (Adelin Phelps) who takes guitar lessons from a has-been rocker (Annie Enneking) in hopes of learning how to play lullabies for her baby. Enneking knows this business. She’s frontwoman for the band Annie and the Bang Bang. Phelps has impressed critics in several small works around town. David Darrow, one of the founders of 7th House Productions, has musical and acting chops, and James Eckhouse is an actor from film, stage and theater. He was on *Beverly Hills, 90210* and recently worked with Bryan Cranston on the LBJ play *All the Way*.

7:30 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 2 p.m. Sun., 7:30 p.m. Wed.-Thu. Ends Feb. 7. Ritz Theater, 345 13th Av. NE., Mpls. $23-$37. 612-339-3003 or latteda.org.
Credit where credit is due: Theater Latté Da has been absolutely crushing it. Artistic Director Peter Rothstein was a STrib Artist of the Year, actor Mark Benninghofen was a CP Artist of the Year, critics and audiences couldn’t get enough of Sweeney Todd, then the Christmas Time production of All Is Calm at the Pantages got good reviews. And that’s just in the last few months of 2015! To kick off the new year, Theater Latté Da presents the brand new Lullaby, an alt-rock musical that merges comedy with a moving story about guitar lessons helping overcoming grief. It’s going to be a hot show, but there should be a few seats left for this weekend. (Btw, we’ve always loved The Ritz, and we’re loving this re-invigoration thanks to TLD.) January 13th-Feb 7th, multiple showtimes. Friday night preview $21, remaining shows $30. —Hitara

Ritz Theater, 345 13th Ave NE, MPLS; theaterlatteda.com
In the new play with music, *Lullaby*, a straight widowed mother hires a lesbian for guitar lessons. Friendship and forgiveness are central themes. Playwright Michael Elyanow has written *Lullaby*, now in production by Theater Latté Da’s new works initiative, the *Next 20/20 series*. It plays at the Ritz Theatre featuring Annie Enneking and Adelin Phelps. David Darrow and James Eckhouse co-star.
Elyanow shares “I love buddy comedies, and I feel like I haven’t seen one about a gay/straight friendship — or about two women — onstage in a long time. Or forever. If I have a mission as a playwright, it’s to write the next wave of “Gay Plays,” which is to say deeply theatrical experiences where gayness is not the subject of the play, but the essence of the character. I think when gay women and men come to see *Lullaby*, they’ll see a fuller picture of themselves in it: three-dimensional, funny, flawed, and maybe just a touch weird.”

Elyanow adds that the production “is a true family affair: my husband, Jeremy Cohen, is directing it. People often ask us if that’s problematic, and it’s actually the opposite. We work really well together; Jeremy’s a brilliant, intuitive director and the fact that we’ve been collaborating on and offstage for close to 20 years gives us a shorthand when we’re in the rehearsal room.”

*Lullaby*
Through Feb. 7
Ritz Theatre, 345 13th Ave. NE, Minneapolis
612-339-3003
www.latteda.org
Reviews
If music can help us heal, can it also make us hurt? That’s one of the themes suggested by *Lullaby*, the play-with-songs being given its world premiere production by Theater Latté Da.

That’s not all the play is about, of course. There are but four characters in *Lullaby* but, over the course of 90 minutes or so, they grapple with addiction, depression, suicide, insomnia, cancer, unrequited lust and poopy diapers.

You could argue Michael Elyanow’s comedy — oh, yeah, it’s a comedy — is a trifle overstuffed.

But Jeremy B. Cohen’s graceful production holds it together, shifting fluidly between two settings — a Massachusetts home and a Boston lesbian bar — as three characters cope with parallel difficulties: Cassie (Adelin Phelps) and her inability to move past the death of her music-loving husband (David
Darrow, mostly on-stage as a ghost), bar owner/singer Thea (Annie Enneking) and her inability to say goodbye to a bad relationship and Cassie’s father, Gabriel (James Eckhouse), and his inability to stop enabling his alcohol-addicted wife.

None of that sounds terribly funny but the play’s greatest gift — or maybe its second-greatest — is Elyanow’s bracing wit, which brings us up short every time we fear the piece is about to get maudlin or pat.

There’s a modern, absurdist side to Elyanow’s humor — as when a character describes the doughnut hole as “the best use of negative space ever” — but also a Neil Simon-like craftsmanship in one-liners such as Thea’s reaction to the description of a pedantically curated microbrewery ale: “Whatever just came out of your mouth just now sounds so f—— horrible, I gotta have one.”

Enneking rips into that line — and all her lines — with a gusto that is as refreshing as it is hilarious.

Her brash, sharp-tonged Thea is Elyanow’s strongest characterization, a woman who has lived just enough life to understand others’ contradictory behavior but not quite enough to understand her own.

A woman of many parts, Enneking (who also teaches and choreographs stage combat) gets to bring together two of them — acting and rock singing — and the results are spectacular, as if she’s thrilled to be able to use so much of her talent in service to a character that talent fits perfectly.

Thea and Cassie come together when the latter asks the former to teach her to play the guitar, so she can sing lullabies to her infant son but also because it may help her process the grief she feels for her late husband, who brought music into their lives and who, she fears, may have taken it away forever with his death.

Cassie’s story ends up having to do with depression and, without spoiling the play’s surprises, it features an unusually intelligent and compassionate treatment of the subject, one that grapples with not only how difficult the disease must be for the loved ones of its sufferers but also how agonizing it is for the depressed person who doesn’t know how to get help.

There are no easy answers in Lullaby, but it does guide its characters toward reconciliation.

The moving-toward-happiness ending, in fact, is one of many reminders of Gabriel’s alcoholic wife, who we don’t meet but who would undoubtedly be familiar with the serenity prayer.

That prayer hovers over the play’s finale, by which time the characters have hopefully learned to accept what they can and cannot change and to know the difference between the two.

Chris Hewitt can be reached at 651-228-5552.

Follow him on twitter.com /ChrisHMovie.

What: Lullaby

When: Through Feb. 7
Where: Ritz Theater, 345 13 Ave. NE, Mpls.

Tickets: $37-$23, 612-339-3003 or latteda.org

Capsule: The play-with-music is clever and compassionate.
A world premiere written by Michael Elyanow and directed by Jeremy Cohen, *Lullaby* (Theater Latté Da, through Feb 7 performing at the Ritz Theater) is a story of family drama, broken relationships, mental illness, and grief aided by contemporary rock tunes. To those who are familiar, this may sound a lot like 2008’s Broadway sensation *Next to Normal*, and the show indeed owes a palpable debt to this work, even mirroring some of its more indelible devices. However, where *Next to Normal* opted to turn up the volume, *Lullaby* smartly whispers. It is a poignant and affecting exploration of the power of friendship in the midst of trauma and loss.

Set in Boston, the show’s plot centers on a young mother, Cassie, who is experiencing turmoil in her personal life, particularly in her relationship with her husband Craig. Cassie moves in with her father, Gabriel, and reaches out to Thea, a local musician and bar owner, for guitar lessons so she can share the gift of music with her son. Thea and Cassie’s friendship blossoms, and as they grow to trust one another with their baggage, they mutually move closer to finding meaning and much needed closure.

Anchoring the play with uneasy, manic energy is Adelin Phelps as Cassie. She is the heart of the story, and Phelps allows her character to transform through uncertain glances and tics. She is juxtaposed with Thea, who is played with warm-hearted, blue-collar irreverence by Annie Enneking. These two actresses have real chemistry and imbue the show with sincerity in moments that easily could have felt forced.

Enneking shares the show’s singing duties with a magnetic David Darrow, playing Cassie’s troubled, but loving husband Craig. In some of the show’s most inspired stagings, these two share meaningful harmonies. With spot on music direction by Peter Morrow, both singers are compelling on their own,
but there is something specially moving about the blend of their wonderful voices. It certainly helps that the music and lyrics (by Garrison Starr, Chris Dallman, Curt Schneider, and Elyanow) offer haunting melodies and subtle, thoughtful words for them to sing.

The small cast is rounded out by James Eckhouse, playing Cassie’s assured, but weary father Gabriel. Eckhouse offers an endearing turn in a supporting role that grows as the show progresses. The entire cast avoids what could easily have turned to histrionics in favor of composed nuance and occasional humor. The result is an impressive, sustained sense of sincerity from each of the performers.

Undoubtedly, much credit for the power of these performances is due to Cohen’s understated direction. The show never feels self-important despite its weighty subject matter, and only in the show’s most dire moments does it employ more stylized sound and lighting effects, which makes their use all the more effective. This is all bolstered by Geoffrey Curly’s clean and simple set design, allowing for action to move with ease while capturing many small details of lived-in spaces.

This play is one of two brand new shows to be staged through Theater Latté Da’s Next 20/20 program this year. This ambitious initiative has the goal of developing twenty new musicals by the year 2020. If only a few of those upcoming works end up being as lovely and impressive as Lullaby, it would be hard to deny the project’s worth. Go see this warm, moving play and experience some of the best and most exciting work the Twin Cities has to offer.

David and Chelsea Berglund review movies on their site Movie Matrimony.
2015 was my 5th full year as a Twin Cities Theater Blogger, and I saw a record high 200+ shows. When I look at those numbers, or at my busy schedule, I sometimes think, why do I do this? Why do I devote all of my free time to this part-time job for which I don't get paid? And then I see a show that reminds me why I do this. That reminds me why I started going to theater, why I started writing about theater, why I think theater (and specifically music-theater) is the most beautiful and powerful art form we have. LULLABY is one such show. This new original play-with-music is everything I want music-theater to be: funny, smart, relevant, relatable, moving, poignant, with awesome songs and a brilliant cast and creative team pouring their heart and souls into the work. This is the first of 20 new works of "theater musically" that Theater Latté Da has committed to developing by 2020 in a project they're calling Next 20/20.* It's an exciting thing to create the future of music-theater, and LULLABY has set the bar high for this project.

There are so many stories told in LULLABY it's hard to believe it's only about 90 minutes long. Stories of friendship, marriage, family, addiction, depression, and the power of music to heal. It's about people who meet each other when they need each other most. Cassie asks Thea to teach her to play the guitar so she can sing to her son, but there are deeper reasons why she needs the music. Thea is stuck in a relationship she's trying to get out of. Cassie's father Gabriel is so busy taking care of his daughter and his alcoholic wife that he doesn't take time for himself. Cassie's husband Craig struggles with depression, unable to get out of the hole he's crawled into. All of these people come together with difficult, messy, real relationships. Through it all, music is there to help them express their emotions, connect with each other, and heal, in the way that only music can.

Michael Elyanow has written a beautiful play that's beautifully directed by his husband Jeremy B. Cohen. The seeds of the play were planted when singing to their young son to sleep ten years ago, and the personal connection to the subject matter shows. They've chosen the perfect cast of four actors, all of whom are just fantastic in the roles and so connected to their characters. Adelin Phelps returns from last year's NEXT workshop to inhabit the role of Cassie with much heart and raw vulnerability (and Cassie is
lying when she says she can't sing, Adelin has a lovely voice). Annie Enneking** is, quite literally, a rock star as Thea (in her spare time when not acting and fight choreographing for every theater in town, she headlines the band Annie and the Bang Bang) and is so fierce and funny. James Eckhouse*** is a natural as the supportive dad (a role he has experience in, having played the Minnesota Walsh twins' father in *Beverly Hills 90210*, my fellow early '90s teenagers can geek out now). Last but certainly not least is the continually more impressive David Darrow. Having just composed a beautiful score for 7th House Theater's *The Great Work*, he returns to the stage as this damaged soul Craig, equally expressive in his acting, singing, and guitar-playing. This small ensemble really gels and feels like a true family.

*LULLABY* is a play with music, not a traditional musical, because the characters sing in context rather than breaking out into song in the middle of a conversation. Thea sings at her bar, Craig sings around the house to his family. The seven songs in the show are of a sort of folk-rock style, and were written by four different songwriters. Four people writing a score could be a mess, but in this case it works. Five songs come from L.A. based singer/songwriters Chris Dallman and Garrison Starr, and the playwright contributed the other two. Even though most of these songs were not written for this play, they all fit organically into the story and sound authentic to the characters. The only instrumental accompaniment is Annie and David on acoustic guitar, and the actors are blissfully unmiked! The character of Thea sings into a mic at the bar, which makes sense and gives it more of a rocker vibe, but the other songs are sung with no amplification, something I love to hear in music-theater.

Walking into the Ritz Theater you can't help but be struck by the set. As in past Latté Da shows at the Ritz, there are no walls around the stage, which allows for a big open space. Scenic Designer Geoffrey Curly has filled this space with a very real and comfortable home (including kitchen, living room, huge bookcase, and stairs), and a bar area hung with artwork taking up one-third of the stage, with characters seamlessly transitioning between the two areas.

*LULLABY* continues through February 7. If I haven't already convinced you that you need to see this beautiful, poignant, funny new work of music-theater, I'm not sure what else I can say. It's a must-see (and bring tissues).

Photo credit: Adelin Phelps, Annie Enneking, and James Eckhouse (photo by George Byron Griffiths)

*Theater Latté Da is presenting their 2nd new work this season with Bradley Greenwald and Robert Elhai's musical adaptation of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, C., this spring.*

**Read my BWW colleague Kristen's interview with Annie here.**

***James Eckhouse's appearance in this play is not as random as it seems. Although based in L.A., his wife, Sheila Kiliher Walsh, is currently a playwright at the Playwright's Center, where Jeremy B. Cohen is Artistic Director.*
A play with music by Michael Elyanow • Featuring Music and Lyrics by Garrison Starr, Chris Dallman, Curt Schneider and Michael Elyanow • Directed by Jeremy B. Cohen • Music Direction by Peter Morrow • Featuring Adelin Phelps, Annie Enneking, David Darrow and James Eckhouse

Theater Latté Da is one of the only companies in the Twin Cities devoted to musicals, and this alone makes me a long-time fan. So much of our theatre history in America starts and ends with musical theater, but it’s become a really hip genre to hate over the years. For LGBTQ+ people, musicals have historically been a much needed outlet for escapism as well as served as a genre rich in queer coding in times when you couldn’t outright perform queer work for fear of social or legal repercussions. It has always somewhat baffled me then, that in the modern times, we don’t see more LGBTQ+ characters in musicals. That lack of evolution is a betrayal to the original cheerleaders and champions of the genre, which is what makes Theater Latté Da’s work even more outstanding. In spite of being a theatre company most concerned with elevating musical theater as an art form, Latté Da has consistently done a wonderful job of incorporating LGBTQ+ voices into their work and have been very outspoken in their advocacy. In Lullaby those voices get to take center stage.
Lullaby is in many ways a love song to music and musicals themselves. The story focuses on grief and mental illnesses, centering around Cassie, a young mother played by Adelin Phelps, who wants to make sure her child grows up with music even though the child’s father, a musician, took his own life. This really only scratches the surface of a story that unfolds to tell a heartwarming queer-relevant story about healing and chosen family. Elyanow in the Playwright’s notes talks of creating this story as a hypothetical based on his own life — what if he, the musician passed? Who would sing to his child? Who would teach his partner guitar so he could pick up where Elyanow left off? How would they all cope? In what is perhaps a throwback to the earlier days of musical theater and queer coding, the couple is rewritten as a presumably straight couple. Watching a new musical through 2016 eyes, I don’t necessarily love this choice. I do not think much if anything of the story would have been changed or lost by making the main couple gay, but the story also isn’t altered or lost by having them as opposite gender partners, so at least there’s that. Cassie and Craig fight, fall apart, and remain desperately in love even as Craig (played by David Darrow) does so posthumously. Some of the problems people have with musical theater are still present in this production. Most notably banter and dialogue at times seems forced and unnatural. The show shines though in the scenes where music remains the star of the show, especially when Thea, the founder of a “dyke bar” that Cassie strongholds into being her friend and music teacher, get to sing from her gut. Thea is played by Annie Enneking, who’s voice hits you in your gut and serves as a harsh, emotional contrast to Craig’s dulcet lullabies.

In spite of not quite escaping from some of the trappings of musical theater as a genre, Lullaby is so heartbreaking where it needs to be and so uplifting when it should be that I do truly think this is a show even non-musical theater fans will enjoy. Cassie is struggling with not only the loss of her husband and his music, but with the tumultuous strained relationship with her mentally ill addict of a mother. We don’t see either Liam (the baby) or Cassie’s mother, but we see the fallout from their existences. They haunt the story and become it’s driving forces, and the choice to not make them seen characters was an ambitious one that completely worked. They drive the story in different ways of course — Liam haunts Cassie’s conscience, serving as the angel on her shoulder encouraging her to pick up music and try to pick herself up in the process. Her mother exists in phone calls and relayed messages from Cassie’s father, and her own sickness reinforces Cassie’s struggle to accept the mental illnesses of people she loves, dragging her deeper into grief with every mention.

By contrast, Craig’s spirit remains as a figment of Cassie’s grief-stricken imagination, or perhaps a sleep-deprived hallucination. He literally haunts the stage—also an ambitious choice that pays off. Cassie’s father Gabriel, played endearingly by James Eckhouse, is trying to keep his daughter safe from herself while remaining hopelessly in love with a woman who’s body is still here but is, in many ways, as lost to the family as Craig. He finds solace in his relationship with Liam and his own unlikely and charming friendship with Thea. Gabriel is a refreshing change of pace. His fights with Cassie are rooted in real fears of losing her and his wife in turn. So often protective fathers are overprotective fathers, doting husbands either dolts or controlling. His friendship with Thea unfolds as naturally as hers does with Cassie, and Eckhouse clearly has great love for and comfort with this character. He’s an academic who loves and misses the free-spirited wife he once knew. He’s completely comfortable around Thea, even when Thea shows up for what she thinks is a hook-up. I think it’s incredibly important that our changing times are reflected, and I would have been taken out of the story or even frustrated if Gabriel had any defenses up with Thea or was in any way weird about her hanging out with Cassie. Of course there are homophobes still, but there are many, many more people who aren’t, especially in the age and social strata of Gabriel. Gabriel shouldn’t be groundbreaking by now, but he is, not only for his lack of pretense and his acceptance of Thea, but because he fathers Cassie with his heart and not his ego.
For the purposes of The Column, we really need to talk (rave!) about Thea. Thea could have been done so poorly. I have sat through so many otherwise great films or plays where the self-proclaimed dyke best friend is a snarky comic relief, secretly pining for the lead character, or remains miserable throughout the show for unsure reasons. Elyanow recognizes these pitfalls of art and subverts them completely. Thea and Cassie originally get together due to a misunderstanding where Thea thinks they are hooking up, but as the play progresses and their friendship deepens, any iota of sexual or romantic tension dissipates fully. Thea is sarcastic and snarky, going through a divorce, living in a U-haul — and that all serves as a part of who she is, and not the entirety of her character. She is eager for non-romantic love as well as romantic, passionate about music, and a fully realized character.

Lullaby is undoubtedly Cassie’s story, but Thea’s does not get lost or play second fiddle to it. Thea is Cassie’s best friend in the world, but Thea does star in Thea’s story — we just don’t necessarily see it. She is no sidekick and I keep harping on this because it is so important and so rare. I see so much of myself in this character. She does not take a toxic ex back, although she is tempted. She is so strong but so human. She feels safer in the in-between stages and who has not hit that stage of life or harbored those fears of truly moving forward? What I see of myself most of all is what I initially brought up—she loves her chosen family deeply and without abandon, but she does not sacrifice herself or her own needs. This is unheard of in lesbian characters, often even in queer art. I am lucky to live in a time where if I want to see queer women in art or media, I have choices, and many of them are very, very good choices. But in spite of what allies and politicians seem to think, we do not live in a post-gay society and I still have to search really hard for characters I relate to outside of their identity. So while I had initial concerns about the main couple being straight, Lullaby does not abandon their queer audience. Thea is not for male consumption like queer women on TV so often are, and she does not walk around brooding like so many on stage do. The love story between her and Cassie is one of the most beautiful ones I’ve ever watched unfold on stage and it is not remotely romantic in nature. She is very much a lesbian—she makes jokes at her own expense about living in a U-haul. She processes over and over again with her ex. She calls herself a dyke and has the leather jacket to prove it, but she is so ready for truly unconditional love. She is groundbreaking, and in the hands of a lesser director, performer, or playwright, she still would have been buried, but she isn’t in Lullaby.

Phelps’ Cassie is falling apart at the seams, and rightly so. I’m afraid to say too much because I don’t want to give away her breathtaking character arc, but this is a protagonist worth rooting for. Grief is a universal experience, one of the few we have as humans. Everybody grieves when they lose someone close to them. The fact that Craig was so young, her child’s father, a man she loved—and the guilt she carries around over his death and her anger at it all weighs down on her as she struggles to keep her head above water and keep music in her and Liam’s lives. Cassie is not a groundbreaking character, but she shouldn’t be. She is surrounded by them, however, and the way she navigates this as her own life falls apart and she is charged with keeping it together should be a universal story, and it is one Phelps delivers beautifully, almost as a gift to music lovers and anyone who has grieved.

What we do not see enough of that directly impacts Cassie’s story is men struggling with mental illness. Craig could have died young in so many ways, via physical sickness, accident, manslaughter. Elyanow makes a crucial, deliberate choice to use this platform to talk about the tragic effects of depression, to blame it entirely as a disease and not a weakness, and to force us to revisit how we think about those we ultimately lose to it. Cassie struggles the entire play to admit she is angry, and then to try to overcome that. I suffer from PTSD and pretty severe anxiety, and it is rare that I cross paths with straight, cisgender men in waiting rooms or support groups when I am receiving treatment. Some of this is the nature of my trauma, but most of it is the nature of a society that sees mental health disparities as
the problem of the individual, a society that says men must be strong always, a society where all are
ridiculed for their depression, and men are too often silenced from speaking out about theirs. Thea is
groundbreaking and important for queer women, but Craig's story is crucial to a society that says it
wants to do better. It is even more crucial to a society that doesn't.

Switching gears completely, *Lullaby* is a musical and I do want to talk a little more about the music.
Craig's music fits the title to lure us in in the beginning. Even as we see his story of severe depression
and see him through a very (understandably) angry Cassie's eyes, his folk-inspired music sets the tone
throughout the show. However, because he sets the tone for the show, Darrow doesn't get stuck in
smooth vocals and quiet strumming, which is great because I love watching performers show us the
variety of what they can do. Watching his depression and anger take hold but ultimately give way to our
base lullaby is a riveting ride. Thea's Ani DiFranco-inspired songs will make you nostalgic for a time when
we openly called dyke bars what they were, and the raw emotion Enneking can channel into the mic will
make you hate every ex you still love regardless of your own sexual identity.

Technically speaking, *Lullaby* makes great use of lights and set. There are times you don't notice the
lights except as “on” or “off,” but unless done for artistic effect, that SHOULD be the case. When used
for artistic effect—such as to give Thea spotlights when performing or flush the stage with red in
showdowns between Cassie and Craig's spirit, *Lullaby* succeeds. Some of this success is more crucial
than other bits of it. The red is a nice touch, but what I really would have missed if it weren't there is the
spotlights, both on Thea in the nightclub setting, and in dramatic moments of dialogue. The set
functions well, is very cute (as someone who is apartment hunting, I actually wished the home were
real), and sets the bar and the home apart without creating too much work for the performers. Gabriel
is a very progressive college professor, and I completely bought the house as an academic's. Rubyfruit,
the "dyke bar" looks like every queer 90's girl’s dream of what running your own lesbian bar would be
like, and yes, that is a compliment. The acting is lovely across the board—it is what I wanted from a
show called *Lullaby*. In spite of some stilted language, these performers find time to really show their
skills, and manage to do so without trying to (metaphorically) upstage or take focus from the others. It's
a hard feat to accomplish—standing out via blending in, and this ensemble does a stellar job.

*Lullaby* is a world premiere, and as such, I suspect some of those problem dialogue spots will get
tweaked over time, and I suspect that as these characters grow and flourish for the audience for the first
time that the show will only get better. For a world premiere musical, there are surprisingly few rough
edges outside of that. The music tells the story but isn’t the story. Each character is fully realized,
something so few shows I’ve seen have done. Three of the four characters and completely
groundbreaking, and there is really necessary stuff in this play. And that fourth character? She is all of
us. She is the part of us that has trouble seeing past our own pain, that doesn’t want to forgive but will,
that doesn’t want to love but does, and does so so deeply that she moves through life making it better
for everyone she meets without even realizing it.

*Lullaby* is playing at the Ritz Theater through February 7. Tickets and more information about the
production are available via Theater Latté Da.
The main complaint people have with musicals is that they can't handle the bursts of song in the midst of "real life."

But if film audiences can believe that a man can fly, it's not much of a leap to embrace two people sharing their eternal love with a soaring tune.

Cassie is in trouble. Struggling to take care of her two-year-old son, she's been forced back to her parents' home. And she can't sleep. Three-hours-a-week can't sleep.

Worse, she sees her dead husband everywhere. He'd been a musical soul, constantly singing around the house. Now his spirit continues to do the same, pushing Cassie further and further into despair.
One night Cassie stumbles into a "dyke" bar, where its captivating co-owner Thea is on stage. Cassie has an idea. If Thea can teach her how to play guitar, she can share her husband's music with her son. Cassie hopes this soul-soothing act will finally let her sleep.

Thea, not surprisingly, thinks Cassie is looking for a date. She has recently broken up with her long-time partner and is also adrift. She lives out of a U-Haul, afraid to find a new place in case her old flame asks her back.

Once Cassie makes her reasons clear, Thea is on board. Their friendship blossoms, but Cassie's problems run deep — especially as we learn more about the circumstances of her husband's death and the anger she feels for her absent, alcoholic mother. Playwright Michael Elyanow gives us a work with a gentle soul, populated by characters that go beyond "grieving wife" and "jilted lover." The actors — especially sweet-voiced David Darrow as Craig, the late husband, and the tough-but-tender Annie Enneking as Thea — are excellent.

So why is Lullaby less than it could be? It goes back to the whole "play with music." The songs are fine and the performances engaging, but the scenes where a character just stands on stage and sings are dramatically inert.

They only come to life when Craig's specter follows Cassie. It's a breathtaking moment that finally welds the music to the drama.

Considering Cassie's tenuous connection to reality, more of this could have been done. A confrontation with her father thirsts for a song instead of shouty acting. A song that gets to the heart of their conflict could have been rare and beautiful.

That's Lullaby in a nutshell: a good story and solid performances shortchanged by a script afraid to embrace its own musical heart.

IF YOU GO:
Lullaby
Ritz Theater
345 13th Ave. NE, Minneapolis
Through Feb. 7; 612-339-3003
Lullaby, billed as a play with music, is a brand new work written by Michael Elyanow and developed by Theater Latté Da as part of their Next 20/20 initiative. Lullaby had a developmental staging last season and was swiftly shepherded to its current full production at the Ritz Theater. The result: Lullaby is a deeply moving work. Its characters feel like real people with relationships and emotions that ring true. It is directed seamlessly by Jeremy B. Cohen who draws terrific performances from his four actors. On the down side, the tale Elyanow tells strains credibility at times. Things occur that seem implausible, in spite of authentic characters and feelings.

At the center of Lullaby is Cassie, a young mother who has been unable to sleep since her husband Craig died six months before. With their two-year-old son, she has moved back to her childhood home near Boston. Craig appears as a character seen and heard only by Cassie, who knows her visions of him are illusions, yet cannot keep herself from engaging with them. Cassie’s father Gabriel is a super-supportive dad and grandpa, while working as a professor of film studies and tending to Cassie’s mom, an alcoholic in residential treatment. The fourth character is Thea, a past-her-peak musician and co-owner of a club she describes as "a dyke bar," though she has been told the term is politically incorrect. Thea is recovering from a recent break up with her partner of 18 years.

Craig was a musician who, in life, serenaded his infant son with lullabies. In Cassie’s visions he still does. She believes that if she learns to play guitar she will bring music back to their son, and in turn Craig’s haunting presence will cease and she will be able to sleep. Cassie wanders into Thea’s bar for a drink and, after an initial period of hostility, Thea becomes both Cassie’s guitar teacher and best friend.
The plot points in the last sentence feel highly unlikely, even illogical. In their first meeting, Cassie is so obtuse and Thea so curt that it is hard to imagine either one giving the other a second thought. Cassie knows she is in a lesbian bar, yet is surprised that Thea interprets her entreaties as a come-on. Once Cassie makes her intentions clear, Thea insists that she is not a teacher, yet Cassie implores Thea to teach her because her previous instructors were men who couldn't keep their hands off her. Why had Cassie not tried to find a qualified female guitar teacher? Surely they exist in the Boston area. And why do neither Cassie nor Thea have any other friends? Yes, they both have been through severe traumas, but those don't have to have left them bereft of any other friends or sources of support.

These are ways in which the plot feels contrived, moving forward because it was written to, not because that's how lives are lived. Yet, the script's sensitivity to these characters' feelings and the strong performances manage to overcome the gap in credibility and generate concern for Cassie, and also Thea. Lullaby goes on to reveal the personal crisis that precipitated Thea's break-up, painful particulars of Craig's death, and the long-standing conflict between Cassie and her dysfunctional mother, with Gabriel trying to broker an accord between them. That's a lot of angst to wade through in one ninety-minute show, and it is to the playwright's credit that we maintain interest in Cassie, Thea, and Gabriel and hope for their happiness. It helps that all three are likeable characters, especially as played, respectively, by Adelin Phelps, Annie Enneking and James Eckhouse.

Phelps portrays Cassie as a young woman who has struggled to be in control of her life in response to the dysfunction brought on by her mother's alcoholism and Craig's illness. She has spiraled into insomnia, desperate to avoid the fall that lies just ahead. Phelps makes Cassie bright and perky, but also tired and frightened as she tries to generate enough go-power to stave off the forces of loss and guilt. It is a complex performance that is one of the main reasons we believe in Lullaby even when we don't believe its story.

Another reason we believe in Lullaby is Annie Enneking's equally striking performance as Thea. She presents Thea as thick-skinned and self-sufficient, slowly peeling away her outer skin to reveal softness and compassion within. She is a survivor who wants more than to just survive. She is also terrifically funny, and lands the numerous laugh-lines playwright Elyanow has provided. Her throaty, weary sounding voice is perfect for the songs Thea sings as she strives to keep music at the center of her turned-over life.

James Eckhouse is likeable and believable as Gabriel, a gentle and nurturing academic, faithful, if perhaps a bit too enabling, to his manipulating wife and drawing forth all the support he can muster for his beleaguered daughter. Because we believe so much in his goodness, his eruption when finally squeezed too tightly between his wife and daughter is also palpable. David Darrow, a frequent member of Theater Latté Da casts, plays Craig, who is beyond suffering, and his relaxed and easy disposition as he haunts Cassie with his presence only adds to her pain, especially in contrast to hardships he suffered (seen in a flashback) in life.

Lullaby is staged on a wonderfully wrought set designed by Geoffrey Curly that uses the full width of the Ritz Theater's stage, with the wood-grained, bookish foyer and living room of Cassie's childhood home on one side, and Thea's battered and rough-edged bar on the other. Paul Whitaker's lighting design guides us smoothly between the playing areas, and illuminates the shifts in Cassie's focus between searching inwardly and reaching outward.
As for the music, we hear songs sung by Thea on stage at her bar or in the course of Cassie's guitar lessons, and by Craig as he coaxes Cassie to remember music they shared together, and with their son. The songs, contributed by Garrison Starr, Chris Dallman, Curt Schneider, and Michael Elyanow, are in a country-folk vein. They do not reveal character or advance the plot, but are part of the atmosphere, adding to the longing for release at the heart of the play. None of the songs are truly memorable, though "Heart Collector" can be understood as Thea's own warning to protect her heart from future hurts, and "Gasoline" catches the drunken spirit of feeling good about feeling bad.

_Lullaby_ contains a lot of very good work—strong direction, beautiful stage design, and excellent performances—that in combination stir up deep feelings. The emotional journey is depicted with enough conviction to make the outcome truly gratifying. And yet ... It would be even better if all of this were built upon a story that rang true.

_Lullaby_ is worth seeing for all that it offers, especially in this very fine production. If future iterations can knit together the gaps in its plot, this emotionally rewarding work has the potential to become a truly masterful play.

_Lullaby_ continues through February 7, 2016, at the Ritz Theater, 345 13th Avenue NE, Minneapolis, MN. Tickets: $30.00 - $35.00. For tickets call 612-339-3303 or go to theaterLattéda.com.

Written by: Michael Elyanow; Music and Lyrics: Garrison Starr, Chris Dallman, Curt Schneider and Michael Elyanow; Director: Jeremy B. Cohen; Assistant Director: Benjamin French; Music Director/Sound Engineer: Peter Morrow; Set Design: Geoffrey Curly; Lighting Design: Paul Whitaker; Costume Design: Trevor Bowen; Dialect Coach: Keely Wolter; Properties Mistress: Amy J. Reddy; Technical Director: Stein Rosburg; Production Manager: Dylan Wright; Stage Manager: Lisa M. Smith.
Closure is one of the biggest issues all of us must contend with as human beings. When we don't find closure regarding traumatic events — which we all have — the ramifications spill over and bleed into our life stream. Playwright Michael Elyanow has ingeniously structured the problem of closure on three tracks in his extraordinary new play with music, *Lullaby*, now in its splendid world premiere at the Ritz Theatre. It is part of Theater Latte Da’s Next 20/20 new works program and ranks among the theater’s best productions in recent years.

The three tracks portrayed are a young straight widowed mother who is (1) haunted by the suicide of her guitar-playing husband and (2) by her unwillingness/incapacity to forgive her alcoholic mother. Then there’s an older lesbian musician and bar owner devastated by emotional wounds of her ex.

The former, Cassie (Adelin Phelps), desperately wants to learn to play the guitar so she can bring harmonious music into her baby’s life now that the father is gone. Today’s Trey Parker mentality will surely find much to mock about this, but Elyanow is clearly someone deeply in touch with real, fundamental feelings. On the other hand, Cassie’s unforgiving resentment toward her neglectful mother has warped her connection to reality. Phelps also lives into these layers beautifully. I've been watching
Phelps over the fast two years and have been impressed with her work; this is the best work of hers that I’ve seen yet.

Cassie seeks out a guitar tutor at a lesbian bar, which owner-performer Thea (Annie Enneking) proudly proclaims as a “dyke” zone, despite the politically correct word-policing of our time. The defensive misunderstandings between the two women when they first meet are charmingly funny and point to the patience queer and straight people both need to navigate the early phases of platonic relations.

In recent years, Enneking has distinguished herself as a topnotch stage combat director, but for those who have known the local theater scene, she is a brilliant veteran actress. Though I can’t say I have seen all her performances since she was named Lavender’s Best Actress for Frank Theatre’s production of Mother Courage 10 years ago, this is clearly memorable as well. Enneking brings a grit and ravaged beauty to Thea that you simply cannot take your eyes off. You sense the woman’s emotional wreckage and her struggle to be generous enough to forgive at the same time. When the younger Cassie misinterprets Thea’s struggle on her (Cassie’s) own mistaken terms, sparks fly in a way that is utterly visceral.

Though very much a women’s play, Elyanow has also written two fine male roles for Lullaby which are played to perfection at the Ritz. David Darrow is winningly mercurial as a phantom visage of Cassie’s dead husband whose neglect of their infant was understandably more than she could bear. It’s very easy to come down against a parent who does wrong by their kid, but Darrow embodies a young man who needed help in this difficult world we live in and in which too little is done to help struggling young people. As Bertolt Brecht once wrote: “man needs help from every creature born.”

James Eckhouse gives a powerfully endearing performance as Gabriel, Cassie’s deeply compassionate father, a man who refuses to give up on his daughter and a wife in perpetual rehab, who has drained him of resources and precious energy. He stands by the women in his life. Gabriel raises some profound questions about our duty to stand by or not, those we love, in the face of seemingly irrevocable dysfunction. I see him as an emotional hero. It is thrilling to see Eckhouse back on a Minneapolis stage. He was in Garland Wright’s iconic Guthrie production of Candide in the early 1980s and he has evolved well.

Elyanow’s husband, Jeremy Cohen, has movingly directed Lullaby with emotional intricacy, vulnerability, and classic style loosely reminiscent Neil Simon. Matched with Geoffrey Curley’s set, you get the feeling you have entered into the actual lived-in world of the characters. As if you could lounge on the sofa beside them. The songs by Chris Dallman, Garrison Starr, Curt Schneider, and Elyanow elicit a soulfulness that tugs at the heart. Not to be missed.

Lullaby

Through Feb. 7

Ritz Theatre, 345 15th Ave. NE, Minneapolis

612-339-3003

www.latteda.org
Television
Headline: Actor/Musician David Darrow Talks Performing In ‘Lullaby’
Date: January 27, 2016
Media Outlet: WCCO – CBS MINNESOTA
Media Contact: WCCO

MINNEAPOLIS -- Time is running out to see a new local play that's being called "a beautiful, moving, smart piece of theater."

The stars of Theater Latté Da's Lullaby joined us on KARE @ 4 p.m.
Social Media Samples
Twitter

Paul C. “Friends: Go see LULLABY @TheaterLatteDa! An evocative and powerful piece of theatre!”

Ellen B. “@michaelelyanow @TheaterLatteDa It was incredible, Michael. Bravo.”

Ellen B. “If you see one show this year, let it be Lullaby. Truthful, heartbreaking, inspiring, beautiful.”

Kathy B. “#Lullaby sings. @TheaterLatteDa”

Rachel E. “Go see Lullaby by @TheaterLatteDa - it's heartbreaking and funny and beautiful.”

Heather B. “I am biased. I live for original work. Thank you @TheaterLatteDa for LULLABY. A stunning piece.”

Melissa F. “@TheaterLatteDa truly phenomenal. #NewWorkRocks”

Facebook

Jean S. “Saw it on Sat and highly recommend it!”

Mary B. “Great production. Thank you Latte da.”

Mary E. “A must see.”

Rebecca L. “I love seeing new productions. Huzzah to Theater Latte da for making this possible. They have plans for 20 new shows by 2020.”

Sharon G. “Loved this production! Wonderful cast. Keep up the good work Theater Latte da!”

Terry L. “Saw a beautiful production of a new script at The Ritz, produced by Theatre Latte Da- story with music- the final preview last night. It is a 4 character story of complicated relationships, loss and recovery exquisitely and, at times hilariously, told. A tour de force performance by the venerable Annie Enneking imbues the script with humor and pathos. It is not for the faint of heart, where understanding connections to those close to us are concerned. See- and hear- this thought provoking exploration of living with incisive emotions as one searches for peace and understanding.”

Brian J. “BEAUTIFUL, moving performances by a very talented cast. You will laugh, you will cry. You really MUST see this brilliant production.”

Julie W. “Loved it. You shouldn’t miss this wonderful play!!”

Marcia C. “You shouldn’t miss any of Theater Latte Da's productions. They are all very talented folks. Love this theater!!”

Arabella G. “This was a great production. Bittersweet and Funny with a compelling story and lots of heart.”
Katie H. “friends: go see Lullaby over at Theater Latte Da. GO. it is a beautiful, moving, sharp, smart, funny, heartbreaking piece of theater. and bring your hanky along....i ugly cried a whole lotta snot out of my face. worth it. to the cast, crew, and production team: thank you. for your humor, your heart, your bravery, your voices, and above all, your interpretation and depiction of grief. you hit ALL the right chords.”

Carson K. “Oh my god. Lullaby. Lullaby. Lullaby. What a gorgeous, sparkling, sparky, crazy amazing ride of a music-play. Michael Elyanow, thank you for taking me on that ride. Jeremy Cohen, you are getting a gigantic hug next time I see you. Gorgeous, gorgeous, gorgeous. The cast is absolutely incredible, lovely, nuanced performances all around. Bravo, Adelin Phelps, David Darrow, James Eckhouse. And Annie Enneking, holy shit woman. That is all. Peter Rothstein, thank you for your leadership and vision, bringing this beautiful new musical and so many more to light! Way to change the world. I am proud to be a member of this community. Proud to know all you amazing artists. Twin Cities. DO. NOT. MISS.”

Bradley G. “Congratulations to the creators, cast and crew of Theater Latte Da’s LULLABY! Michael Elyanow, Jeremy Cohen, David Darrow, Adelin Phelps, James Eckhouse and the outstanding (underlined, if I could) Annie Enneking. Go see this new piece of music-theater!”

Jay H. “I’ll second that. Beautiful, sensitive script, superbly performed. Kudos to all!”

Susan H. “Ramlet It was wonderful. We saw it Saturday night.”

Rebecca L. “Saw it yesterday. Absolutely fabulous!”

Sara M. “I saw LULLABY in its first iteration with Latte Da. Super happy opening to Michael, Jeremy, David, and the rest of the cast and crew, and special love to my ladies Annie and Adelin! It’s a beautiful show and I can’t wait to see the full production when I’m back! Break legs!”

Michelle T. “YOU GUYS. Guys. GuysguysguysGUYS. Go see this! Wowza.”

June M. W. “It was fantastic - saw it Sunday 2 PM and loved everything about it. The acting was superb. Don’t miss it!”

Kayley S. “This show was so good- one of my top 2 for sure! Brought me to tears (and everyone else i might add). LOVE IT! Well done.”

Ernie L. “The Critics are RIGHT ! But this is ”No walk in the park play” Well acted, I'm glad I don't need to put out the emotional .presence during the play every time I might go on stage... Kept me involved and I did not guess the ending... WOW... Betting I missed something so I hope I have time and energy to go again...”

Jodi Y. “I recommended Lullaby to many folks and got rave reviews and much gratitude for the suggestion. Some were new to Theater Latte Da. Bravo to the Writer, Director, Cast & Crew. BTW Gasoline is an amazing piece.”

Julie B.W. “This was a phenomenal show - moving, funny, superbly directed and performed. Stellar cast, great music, wonderful set-lights-sound designs. BRAVO!!”

David H. “What a fantastic show - one that will stick with me for a while. Excellent work!”

Jacob Y. “‘Lullaby’ was wonderful! Very emotional story and the music was powerful and amazing.”
Tom F. “Breathtaking!”

Jean B. “Saw this Saturday and going to see it again next week. It is the kind of play that you are still thinking about the next day - moving.”

Tracy N. “It was a privilege to see your work come alive last night. I could hear your voice in the funny bits, and it felt intimate and joyous. Also - I want the pants Thea wore in every scene. I need some sparkly/tight fitting/spandexy things in my life right now. Couldn’t hurt my stage presence as I act through the play I call "My Life".....”

Craig K. "Lullaby" is quite an accomplishment for a new playwright (Michael Elyanow) - compelling characters, clever dialogue, and beautiful music reminiscent of Once. If you have ever been affected by mental illness in its various forms, then I guarantee this will strike a chord. Peter Rothstein, you sure can pick them!”
Pull Quotes
Pioneer Press

“Lullaby hits the right note!”

“A graceful production.”

“The play-with-music is clever and compassionate.”

How was the Show?

“A poignant and affecting exploration of the power of friendship in the midst of trauma and loss.”

“There is something especially moving about the blend of their wonderful voices.”

“Lovely and impressive.”

“Go see this warm, moving play and experience some of the best and most exciting work the Twin Cities has to offer.”

Broadway World

“A Beautiful, Poignant, Funny New Play with Music.”

“Everything I want music-theater to be: funny, smart, relevant, relatable, moving, poignant, with awesome songs and a brilliant cast and creative team pouring their heart and souls into the work.”

“A beautiful play that's beautifully directed.”

“If I haven't already convinced you that you need to see this beautiful, poignant, funny new work of music-theater, I’m not sure what else I can say. It's a must-see (and bring tissues).”

City Pages

“Michael Elyanow gives us a work with a gentle soul, populated by characters that go beyond "grieving wife" and "jilted lover." The actors — especially sweet-voiced David Darrow as Craig, the late husband, and the tough-but-tender Annie Enneking as Thea — are excellent.”

“A good story and solid performances”