

Review of "A Brand New Brain"  
By Julie McHale

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Carroll University, under the embracing tutelage of James Zager, has again gathered together students representing a variety of departments besides theater arts. Biology, psychology, history, graphics, elementary education, and communication majors are also willing participants in the production of "A Brand New Brain," a musical revue which celebrates the music of composer/lyricist William Finn.

Finn's works are largely autobiographical, which might account for the fact that being Jewish and being gay often figure into his works. He also plugs into current events and responds with music as he did in his piece "Elegies," triggered by the 9/11 bombing. His own scare with brain surgery inspired "A New Brain," and his musical, "Falsettos," for which he received his first Tony Award in 1992, evolved when he left his wife and child for his male lover, hoping to maintain his relationship with his marital family. His "25<sup>th</sup> Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," still enjoying a long run on Broadway, is also represented in this show and is a departure from the personal nature of the aforementioned three shows.

Finn is an optimist. Even in the midst of pain and loss, he finds humor and hope. The cast of characters at Carroll reflected that spirit well. They were upbeat, energized, and able to amuse and move us. We were entranced for 80 minutes.

Zager assembled a cast of great variety, both physically and musically. The range of timbres made for an interesting mix in the ensemble numbers, and they also provided a lot of variation in the solos and duets. The choreography and musical accompaniment were simply but flawlessly executed. Rhonda Kwiecien played the piano and assisted Jill Anna Ponasiak with the musical direction.

The show starts out on a humorous note with a quartet of curmudgeons singing "Four Jews in a Room Bitching." Some of the other humorous numbers included "Magic Foot," hilariously delivered by soloist Adam Hobbs, and "The Baseball Game," performed by a small ensemble of devoted fans. "Passover" again revealed Finn's ability to see some of the irony in Jewish practices (religion often serves as the target for satire). Tonya Palmer was perfect in her interpretation.

The mother-son duet, "14 Dwight Avenue," sung by Brittney Johnson and Daniel Polaski, was very poignant. Brittney sang another beautiful duet with Logan Walsh from "Spelling Bee." "I Love You," a touching song sung by parents to their adult child, who doesn't believe them, underscores the disconnect that often exists between parents and children. Samantha Fox was convincing as the bereft child.

Two other outstanding solos were Jackie Hulina's "Anytime" and Logan Walsh's "I'd Rather Be Sailing." Christopher Meissner's intense earnestness and Daniel Polaski's bright face create an aura of infectious joy when they're on stage. Their faces are very reactive. The rest of the able cast included Justin Almquist, Tim Gustafson, Michelle Johnson, and Elisabeth Kunschke

"I Feel So Much Spring" is the most beautiful ensemble number. William Finn does not yet have the reputation of a Stephen Sondheim, the team of Kander and Ebb, or an Andrew Lloyd Webber, but he's certainly on his way to making a permanent mark in the annals of the Great American Musicals. I look forward to his next work.

Carroll University's theatrical offerings are professionally produced and always a joy to behold. Zager's enthusiasm, care, and ability to attract students from many other disciplines, all unite to make a significant contribution to the cultural arts in Waukesha.