

A New Brain

Astoria Performing Arts Center (APAC)

Astoria, NY - May 2007

Reviewed by John Kenrick

It takes guts to do theatre these days, and that goes double when you try to make theatre happen in the outer boroughs of New York City. People who live within commuting distance of Manhattan are so used to finding their entertainment on that little island that they often forget to look in their own local communities. I was born and raised in Astoria, so I'm delighted that my old neighborhood can claim a professional theatre company that has been delighting audiences for the last five years. Instead of cranking out revivals of the usual theatrical warhorses, Astoria Performing Arts Center offers new plays and fresh productions of fascinating but rarely seen musicals. They have another winner in their latest mainstage offering, a production of William Finn's acclaimed off-Broadway work *A New Brain*.

Finn is one of the brightest talents in contemporary musical theatre, and unlike his more easily loveable long-running Broadway hit *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, this piece is a challenge. *A New Brain* offers the semi-autobiographical story of a gay songwriter suddenly faced with a potentially terminal brain illness. This unlikely subject fairly bursts with humanity and humor, as the things that really matter in life sort themselves out of the things that don't. Finn's score ranges from the hilarious to the ravishing, and all points in between.

In the lead role of Gordon Michael Schwinn, **Joe Pace** captures the neurotic uncertainty and growing terror of a creative man facing the loss of his life. **Lois S. Hart** scores major points as his devoted mother, who's sincere lifelong desire to make everything better for her son can't make this threat any less deadly. As Gordon's devoted lover Roger, handsome **Shad Olsen** offers a poignant performance, including a heartfelt rendition of "I'd Rather Be Sailing," a gorgeous song that has found a life of its own in workshops and cabaret acts. **Doug Chitel** wins laughs in the often thankless role of Mr. Bungee, a children's TV star that Gordon unwillingly writes for. As a likeable male nurse, Justin Birdsong shows solid comic instincts and some impressive pipes -- as does **Yolanda Batts** playing a homeless woman who unintentionally weaves her way in and out of the action. Julie Rees, Sevan Green, Stephanie Wilberding and Jim Dimarino all give solid performances, making this the kind of strong ensemble cast we've come to expect from APAC.

Director **Brian Swasey**'s pacing and staging are always a delight. At a time when it has become fashionable for directors to impose a personal vision on musicals, Swasey trusts authors and lets the material define what is needed. If and when Broadway has the sense to make use of such a talent, theatre lovers will all be better off. Swasey's energetic, thoroughly entertaining production has a simple but memorable set by **Michael P. Kramer**, one that visually captures the unheard music filling the main character's mind. Lighting designer **Erik Michael** and costumer **Jessa-Raye Court** do wonders on a shoestring. **Jeffrey Campos** leads the cast and five piece orchestra through this difficult score with a steady hand.

APAC's ongoing search for a performing home has led them to a no-frills but comfortable auditorium in Astoria's Variety Boys and Girls Club -- a bit of a trek from the nearest subway, but a production like *A New Brain* makes it more than worth the trip. After attending the opening performance, a companion who is *not* prone to praise anything said, "That was more satisfying than anything I've seen on Broadway in the last two years." Three cheers for executive director Taryn Drongowski and everyone else who keeps APAC happening. Once again, the guts and determination of this little company have paid off with one heck of a good show!

This production is scheduled to close on May 20, 2006.