

Theater Review: Brown Paper Box Company's Exuberant 'A New Brain'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 27, 2014 - 5:12pm

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CHICAGO – If you hear the melodic choral sounds of an amazing ensemble cast emanating from the North Side of Chicago, then it is sure to be the Brown Paper Box Company's production of "A New Brain." This scintillating musical is performed with mesmerizing exaltation by a formidable cast.



Play Rating: **4.0/5.0**

Performed in a the simple black box of Rivendell Theatre in the Edgewater neighborhood, "A New Brain" is a celebration of creativity, life and love. Its origins are in the biography of William Finn – who wrote the music and lyrics, and co-wrote the book with James Lapine – and who in reality suffered the same traumatic brain operation depicted in the musical. The Brown Paper Box Company's interpretation brings the sparkling songs alive, with each member of the cast together and separately getting their moment to shine on stage.



Billy Dawson (left), Jason Richards and Ensemble in Brown Paper Box Company's 'A New Brain.'

Photo credit: CB Lindsey for Brown Paper Box Company

Gordon (Jason Richards) is a hapless songwriter for a children's TV show in New York, led by the odious Mr. Bungee (Paul G. Miller). His

frustrating career gets interrupted by a seizure while having lunch with his co-worker Rhoda (Jillian Weingart). He needs his lover Roger (Billy Dawson), his mother (Mimi Schwinn) and an intuitive group of the hospital staff (Martin J. Hughes, Johnny Kyle Cook, Anna Schutz, Nick Shoda) to keep him alive.

This ensemble is truly alive, because they bring a verve to the substantial amount of songs and deliver them with true electricity. The choral numbers are performed at a Broadway level, and have an intimate intensity in the small theater setting. The square stage, with a platform for the musicians, is utilized essentially as the story unfolds, and each little corner reveals a new surprise. Much of what the main character Gordon "envisions" is through the complications of brain trauma, so director M. William Panek communicates it through effective set pieces and character mechanics.

The notable individual cast members include the lead couple Jason Richards and Billy Dawson. Their relationship is complicated yet tender, and is the centerpiece for Gordon's struggle and salvation. They both have strong singing voices, and both blend masterfully with their supporters or deliver solo efforts with beauty and love. Other cast members get their song moments, and standouts include Johnny Kyle Cook ("Eating Myself Up Alive"), Neala Barron as Lisa ("On the Street") and the vivid Jillian Weingart, who is unforgettable in "Whenever I Dream."



Typical Fun for the Ensemble in 'A New Brain.'

Photo credit: CB Lindsey for Brown Paper Box Company

But it is the ensemble that really cooks the presentation in numbers like "Heart and Music," "Gordo's Law of Genetics" and "Don't Give In." The incredible string of songs are done almost cabaret style, and Panek's direction – along with T.J. Anderson (Musical Director) and Daniel Spagnuolo (Choreographer) – keeps the story flowing in an entertaining and sly orchestration.

It's time to get rid of some winter blues and feel the heat from a great show in a very short run – eight performances left through March 9th. Get to the North Side for "A New Brain" and get the musical theater equivalent of a new exhilaration.

"A New Brain" is performed by the Brown Paper Box Company of Chicago, and presented at Rivendell Theatre, 5779 N. Ridge Ave., Chicago – Thursday-Sunday through March 9th, 2014. [Click here](#) [20] for more information and to purchase tickets. Featuring Neala Barron, Johnny Kyle Cook, Billy Dawson, Martin J. Hughes, Paul G. Miller, Jason Richards, Anna Schutz, Nick Shoda, Denise Tamburrino and Jillian Weingart. Directed by M. William Panek



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