

## Theater Review: Brown Paper Box Co. Exuberantly Pursues ‘Now. Here. This.’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on July 31, 2016 - 11:39am

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CHICAGO – The Brown Paper Box Co., which embodies the passion and simplistic beauty of the storefront theater tradition, presents another fantastic and insightful musical, “Now. Here. This.” Director M. William Panek guides a splendid cast of two women and two men in a reflective, modern day morality tale.



Play Rating: **4.0/5.0**

The cast – Neala Barron, Matt Frye, Anna Schulz and Nick Shoda – are as searching and eventually self-assured as their characters, and belt out a series of challenging and emotional songs. The show’s theme is self identity, getting past the obstacles of their character’s pasts, and is wrapped in a certain sense of mortality. There is a centerpiece song about each of the character’s grandmothers, and how the passing of that generation is one of the most affecting deaths we encounter. In essence, life is short and getting shorter.



Nick Shoda, Anna Schulz, Matt Frye and Neala Barron of ‘Now. Here. This.’

Photo credit: Zach Dries for Brown Paper Box Co.

Four pals are going to a Natural History Museum, Man 1 (Nick Shoda) is the most enthusiastic and interested of the crew, which includes a mocking Man 2 (Matt Frye), a constant-phone-checking Woman 1 (Neala Barron) and a trust fund baby Woman 2 (Anna Schutz). They use the various exhibits to begin their self-reflection (the opening song “What are the Odds?”), and go through the energies of their lives. Man 1



and Man 2 are gay (not a couple), and speak about the difficulties of that transition (“Dazzle Camouflage,” “Archer”), and the women are working through their privileged and embarrassed upbringings (“Give Me Your Attention,” “That’ll Never Be Me”). The company comes together in many poignant ways, with hope and dreams for being “Now. Here. This.”

The songs and story (Music and lyrics by Jeff Bowen. Book by Hunter Bell and Susan Blackwell) have the “I’m-gonna-burst-into-song” set ups, but overcomes some early sameness by getting stronger as the musical evolves. What works best are the personal songs, like the grandmother reverie, and the moments when the individual cast members are telling their stories, such as “Golden Palace,” a metaphoric number that Neala Barron delivers with authentic emotion.

The cast is blessed with energetic direction and soaring voices. Anna Schutz – a company member of Brown Paper Box Co., as is Nick Shoda – is a glorious chanteuse, using her powerful singing instrument with a depth and purpose that delivers thrilling beauty to her character story. The two gentleman, Shoda and Matt Frye, are living their characters’ dreams, and understand their life memories with heart and humor. The aforementioned Neala Barron portrays a business woman with a difficult facade, and when that mask comes down she assumes a empathetic vulnerability.



Neala Barron and Anna Schulz of ‘Now. Here. This.’

Photo credit: Zach Dries for Brown Paper Box Co.

The black box of the Rivendell Theatre is a perfect playground for the presentation, and the production design by Laura Wiley generates the atmosphere of the museum and the past lives of the characters through video projection, in tandem with the direction/blocking of director M. William Panek. The show is brimming with a sense of being alive, and the cast/crew/orchestra work in a precise ballet to bring that “being” and make it a fruitful celebration.

The concept of “Now. Here. This.” is a Catholic philosopher notion (Thomas Merton), and is probably one of the elements of that religion – and within the show – that can make sense for the audiences. All we have is now, embraced in this, and living here. That can define the heart of the inner Christ, and provide a beacon for the soul.

*Brown Paper Box Co. Presents “Now. Here. This.” now through August 21st, 2016 – Thursday through Saturdays at 7:30pm, Sunday at 2pm – at the Rivendell Theatre, 5779 North Ridge Avenue in Chicago. [Click here](#) [18] for more information and to purchase tickets. Featuring Neala Barron, Matt Frye, Anna Schulz and Nick Shoda. Music & Lyrics by Jeff Bowen. Book by Hunter Bell & Susan Blackwell. Directed by M. William Panek.*



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