

Bare: A Pop Opera @ St. Lou Fringe / Gateway Center for Performing Arts

Music and Book by Damon Intrabartolo

Lyrics and Book by Jon Hartmere

Ran August 15 - 20, 2023 @ The Marcelle Theatre

Published September 1, 2023

Okay, I'm cheating a little bit by reviewing *Bare*. This production is presented by the Gateway Center for Performing Arts, a youth theatre company. That on its own wouldn't qualify for this blog, but because it's a part of the St. Louis Fringe Theatre Festival, a professional institution, I'm counting it. Strange loophole, I know, but another reason I made this special exception is that *Bare* is a musical that takes a lot of bravery and intense care to produce for any theatre, let alone a youth theatre, and let me tell you, I'm so happy that I did.

Bare takes place in the year 1999 at St. Cecilia's Catholic Boarding School. The characters are all high school seniors who are experiencing issues of sexual frustration, drug addiction, suicidal thoughts, and body dysmorphia. Their problems have become particularly explosive because of the institutional bigotry and oppression within the parochial school system. This was especially true in the 1990s, coming off the heels of the AIDS epidemic, the rise of Big Pharma, and the widespread fueling of the mentality that LGBT+ people, people who struggle with substance abuse, and people who don't meet Western standards of beauty are a disease. It is within this cultural context that we explore what happens when this ensemble of high school students is forced to remain silent about the issues that have caused them serious trauma, physically and mentally.

The driving rock score by Damon Intrabartolo and Jon Hartmere speaks to these teens with sincerity and a forcefulness the likes of which I rarely see in any other show. And this cast absolutely nails the singing; all of them have fantastic rock voices thanks to musical director Lori Pagano. Her husband, Paul Pagano, serves as the production's director; his understanding of the material is superb, collaborating with therapist Courtney Loosemore and intimacy coordinator Erica Jo Lloyd to make sure the staging is intense and authentic while also being safe and responsible. Stephanie Fox's choreography powerfully conveys the pent-up aggression and abrasiveness of the characters.

The action is performed with the audience on three sides of the Marcelle Theatre. Against a stained glass window designed by the Paganos, the cast roll on tables, chairs, benches, and props designed by Laura Skroska to seamlessly switch between locations. The costumes by Tracey Newcomb and hair and makeup by Amelia Favazza, despite mainly consisting of school uniforms, do a fantastic job of distinguishing the characters. The lights by Tony Anselmo create wonderfully striking and evocative stage pictures. The sound by Rocco Stolze perfectly balances the band with the actors, the best sound balancing I've ever heard at the Marcelle.

The students being played by real teenagers lends a powerful reality to their portrayals, and everyone does marvelously courageous work. Jack Shadden and Sammy Parsons as the forbidden gay lovers Jason and Peter perfectly capture the fear and anxiety that come from being closeted. Ella Myers gives a biting performance as Nadia, Jason's goth twin sister who is experiencing severe body dysmorphia. Ava Eckhard as Ivy, the most popular girl in school, does a great job of conveying intense sadness from constantly being called "the worst and most perverse bitch at St. Cecilia's." Rounding out the core teen cast are great performances from Duncan Barbour as Matt, the jock who catches onto Jason and Peter, and Aaron Youngman as Lucas, the class clown who serves as the school's plug. The show's three adult characters also share very achingly human performances, emphasizing that they feel just as much societal pressure as the teens do: Dominic Del Pietro as the stoic Priest, Iman Jamison as the fiery nun Sister Chantelle, and Annalise McCann as Claire, Peter's well-meaning but ignorant mother. The show's totally cohesive ensemble consists of Priya Gangasingh, Bri Lacy, Lindsey Moore, Langston Casey, Trey Perlut, Sophia Bellm, Elliana Fiorino, Kampbell Hemeyer, and Aden Hicks.

The Gateway Center for Performing Arts' production of *Bare* is quite possibly one of the best pieces of musical theatre I've ever seen: uncompromising in its raw emotional intensity, a bitching score, seamless directing and design, and gripping performances from a cast of mostly teenagers that professional companies can only strive towards. *Bare* is an absolute gem, and GPAC's production is a groundbreaking, landmark achievement for them as a company. St. Lou Fringe, thank you for putting this company on my radar. I sincerely hope that every single person involved with this production moves on to have wonderful, fulfilling careers in the theatre arts; if they keep up this caliber of work, they will certainly be names to watch out for.