

Theater

The Seattle Times

The 5th Ave offers an emotional 'Prom' during Pride month

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Kaden Kearney (Emma) and Kalyn West (Alyssa) in the national tour of "The Prom," currently playing at The 5th Avenue Theatre. (Deen van Meer)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Theater review

Opening near the end of prom season and

right at the beginning of Pride month, The 5th Avenue Theatre couldn't have picked a better time to host "The Prom." At least in my two-teen household, the flurry of activity around prom and Pride is almost as frenetic as the play. It's just a shame that the serious issues depicted in "The Prom" are still as timely as the celebrations.

The touring production of this Broadway musical, onstage at the 5th Ave through June 19, follows the controversy around a small-town girl, Emma, who is blocked from bringing her girlfriend to the prom by the PTA — led by none other than her girlfriend's mother. A flock of Broadway actors turned self-interested activists — looking for good publicity by defending Emma — makes a bad situation worse.

"The Prom" tells two parallel stories with very different tones. There's the primary, heartfelt story of Emma's struggle to attend prom, which echoes real events [in Itawamba County, Mississippi](#) in 2010. The second story is about the self-absorbed actors learning how to be human. Although "The Prom" is a comedy, for the whole first act, a solitary teen is bullied and harassed by her entire hometown and exploited by her supposed allies. It takes a lot of comedy to balance that out. Fortunately, after the emotional nadir of a fake prom, the balance starts to tip in the exuberant second act.

Emma provides the emotional anchor for the story, portrayed by Kaden Kearney with a tremulous courage that sparks a parent's protective instincts. Although the "Just Breathe" line, "Note to self: Don't be gay in Indiana," earns a laugh, the song feels like a sincere message to all the real-life teens who can relate to bullying. "Unruly Heart" tugged at my own teen's heartstrings.

Those aren't the only songs with emotional weight. Emma's girlfriend, Alyssa (performed by Kalyn West), delivers a wistful "Alyssa Green" that's relatable to

anyone who ever felt like they couldn't measure up to their parents' expectations, and Patrick Wetzel (who also appeared in the Netflix film adaptation) injected some true joy in "Barry is Going to Prom."

But most of the time, Emma's realistic vulnerability and the broad comedic strokes of everything else going on presents an awkward contrast that might be intentional. Like a Christopher Guest mockumentary, the adults' ridiculous behavior sometimes feels too real to be funny. But there are enough Broadway in-jokes and sharply pointed jabs to ride over the rough spots. In all cases, Indiana takes a beating. But Emma's insincere actor allies aren't let off easy either; "The Acceptance Song" captures all the cringe-worthiness of 1980's celebrity charity anthems.

Emma's decision to speak for herself is the emotionally satisfying crux of the story. But it's also a pleasure to watch characters who start out as broad stereotypes grow. Barry transforms from cliché fairy godfather to a genuine mentor. Original Broadway cast member Courtney Balan as the fading Broadway star Dee Dee (evoking "The Devil Wears Prada" Meryl Streep) consciously chooses to learn selflessness. (Streep returns the favor playing Dee Dee on Netflix, but she doesn't have Balan's singing voice.) Juilliard grad Trent (Bud Weber) discovers a cause he really believes in: arts education. The high school kids become more accepting; Alyssa comes out; her mother (an almost frighteningly believable Ashanti J'Aria) learns to listen.

"The Prom" has a lot of plot tucked around its nearly 20 musical numbers, and it could easily fall apart amid its tonal shifts. But perfect casting and tight performances hold it together — every song was beautifully sung, every dance was energizing. With no weak link among the performers, my teen even ended up curious about the backstory of ensemble characters.

It's frustrating, in this day and age, that an LGBTQ+ main character being treated like everyone else counts as a happy ending. But in a world where joyful lesbian kisses are still rare on screen and stage, "The Prom" is a fun package for the kind of happy ending that we all need to see more of.

"The Prom"

Music by Matthew Sklar, book by Bob Martin and Chad Beguelin, lyrics by Chad Beguelin.

Through June 19; 5th Avenue Theatre, 1308 Fifth Ave., Seattle; masks and proof of vaccination or negative coronavirus test [required](#); \$49-\$149; 206-625-1418, [5thavenue.org](https://www.5thavenue.org)

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