What Makes *Next to Normal* So Problematic

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Throughout the history of theatre, there have always been depictions of mental illness represented onstage. Carl Jung even coined the term "Electra complex" from Sophocles' drama, *Electra*. From Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth to Williams' Blanche DuBois, characters with mental disorders are frequently dramatized by playwrights. There are even multiple rock musicals starring or featuring a character with mental illness, such as The Who's *Tommy*, *Spring Awakening*, and others. Recently, PBS has been airing a recorded version of the 2024 West End Production of the hit rock musical *Next to Normal,* and it has been blowing up all over my social media feeds. Every person I know in the theatre community who has seen it raves about it, as does almost every critic, author, and vlogger I've seen. So far, I have only seen two articles and one video giving a negative take on it. The musical centers around a mother who has bipolar disorder, who is getting treatment, then rejects treatment, and how her disorder affects her family. The plot piqued my interest when I first learned about it because of its unique plot. After watching *Next to Normal*, I have come to the conclusion that the representation of bipolar disorder and a wholly negative view of psychiatric medication are entirely ill-informed and irresponsible.

Next to Normal originated in 1998 under the title *Feeling Electric* by composer Tom Kitt and writer/lyricist Brian Yorkey. The *Feeling Electric* musical was a 10-minute sketch created for a BMI Musical Theatre Workshop. After workshopping the short piece over ten years, it was shaped into what is now the musical *Next to No*rmal. Yorkey stated that the inspiration behind *Feeling Electric* came from a segment on Electric Convulsive Therapy (ECT) aired on Dateline NBC. *Next to* Normal was performed off-Broadway in 2008, then moved to Washington, D.C., before opening on Broadway in 2009. The musical toured across the U.S. and to countries all over the world. Even before the musical debuted off-Broadway, it won an Outer Critics Circle Award. Then, the Broadway run of *Next to Normal* earned eleven Tony nominations and won three Tony Awards in 2009. Later, it was awarded the highly coveted Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2010. It has been heralded for bringing awareness to mental health issues.[1]

The story of *Next to Normal* revolves around the central character, Diana Goodman, a mother and wife who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder type 2 sixteen years ago and has been battling the disorder ever since with the support of her husband Dan. While there is some dialogue throughout the musical, most of the show is told through song. Act One’s opening number shows Diana helping her family get ready to go to school and work. While preparing sandwiches on the kitchen counter, Diana gets carried away in a manic state. She moves the sandwich-making to the kitchen floor, seemingly unable to stop, making more and more. This causes Dan to convince her to see a psychiatrist, Dr. Madden, for treatment. Dr. Madden puts Diana on medication to stabilize her. Later, Diana deals with the side effects of the medications, feeling as if she has been medicated to the point of being completely numb to both the pain and

joys of life. Then Gabe, her delusion of her dead son, convinces her to get rid of her medications by flushing them down the sink. Diana is now unmedicated and completely unhinged from reality and brings out a birthday cake for Gabe's eighteenth birthday at dinner. Dan has to remind her that Gabe died at eighteen months and that she's hallucinating visions of him. Diana tries to deal with her trauma by going through Gabe's things, and he comes to her and convinces her that they will be able to reunite if she ends her life. This is the impetus for her suicide attempt immediately afterward. Diana is then hospitalized, and Dan is told that ECT is the best option for her treatment due to its severity. Dan is then able to talk her into consenting to the treatment.

Act Two begins with Diana receiving ECT for weeks, eventually leading her to forget Gabe's existence entirely. Dan decides to keep all the things that might remind her of Gabe away from her and refuses to mention him at all, believing it's the best thing for her recovery. While on a return visit to see Dr. Madden, he mentions her son, which is news to her. Diana goes home and searches until she finds the music box that helped Gabe go to sleep as a baby. Dan finds her and tells her about Gabe's death, and then Diana recalls memories of seeing Gabe as a teenager. Dan then tells her that she needs more ECT to help her deal with her grief, which leads to an argument between them. Then Gabe comes to her, pulling her back into her delusion. Diana goes to have a session with Dr. Madden. She begins to question whether or not her delusions of Gabe are actually a mental problem or something else. As she is contemplating this, Dr. Madden becomes concerned and tells her that she needs to be medicated and needs further ECT treatments, and that many treatments are needed for the full effects to work. Diana leaves Dr. Madden's office after deciding that she is going to discontinue all treatment for her disorder and delusions. Diana leaves Dan, saying she needs to deal with her problems alone without him constantly supporting her when she falls. She moves in with her parents, trying to forge her own way in life while navigating her disorders.

It is important to note that the performance PBS aired was the 2024 West End production of *Next to Normal*, not the off-Broadway or Broadway production. In this version of the musical, unlike the original U.S. productions, Diana takes a pill bottle from Dr. Madden and a brochure on the medication in the last scene. This shows that she is open to receiving psychiatric treatment once again. (The arguments in this piece only pertain to the original U.S. productions of *Next to Normal*, wherein Diana refuses further medication and treatment at the end of the play.)

So, what exactly is bipolar disorder? Bipolar disorder is classified as a mood disorder characterized by severe mood fluctuations, unusual thought patterns, and abnormal behavior. Bipolar disorder was previously referred to as manic depression (renamed to combat the stigma attached to mania) due to the extreme range of mood from mania and hypomania to intense and sometimes dangerous levels of depression. Mania is a state of intense emotional change from someone's normal state, from elevated euphoric feelings to extreme anger. Individuals experiencing mania have a substantial increase in energy levels, racing thoughts, being overly talkative, unusually active, and sometimes bursting with creativity. Mania can cause reckless and dangerous behavior, ranging from actions like unsafe sexual activity and gambling to actions that can cause physical harm. Episodes of mania and depression can last up to several months at a

time. Hypomania is a less severe version of mania, is less dangerous, and does not last as long as mania can.

There are three different types of bipolar disorder: bipolar I, bipolar II, and cyclothymic disorder/cyclothymia (cycling). Bipolar I includes having one or more extended periods of mania, which may or may not involve depressive episodes. Mixed states can also be seen in bipolar I, which includes both mania and depression. Bipolar II presents with hypomanic episodes, and severe chronic depressive episodes are widespread. People with cyclothymia are almost always in an unstable mood state and will not be in a stable mood for more than eight weeks at a time. There are several treatments for bipolar disorder, including psychiatric medications like antipsychotics, therapy, and ECT. On some occasions, people suffering from mania or depression need to be hospitalized until they are stabilized.[2] In *Next to Normal*, Diana has been diagnosed with bipolar II with delusions (as evidenced in her hallucinations of Gabe).

Diana is given a very cut-and-dry description in the character section at the top of Yorkey's script: "Thirties or forties. Sexy. Sharp. Delusional bipolar depressive."3 This leaves the interpretation of Diana wide open to performers and directors. While watching clips of Alice Ripley, the actress who originated the Broadway role of Diana (and won a Tony for her performance), and Caissie Levy in the West End production, it is plain to see that this role can be explored in many different ways. Alice Ripley even played Diana differently throughout the run of the show.

Still, *Next to Normal* represents bipolar disorder in a sort of dumbed-down, simplified way that doesn't reflect mania accurately. For example, Diana's mania is depicted in the play's opening during "Just Another Day," when she makes sandwiches on the counter and grows out of control, continuing to make more and more across the kitchen floor. It has been established that Diana has bipolar II, which includes hypomania but not mania. Someone in a manic state and not in touch with reality might exhibit this behavior; however, someone in hypomania would not act this way. This depiction of bipolar mania is not accurate to her diagnosis. It reflects a much more severe mental state that is an easy plot device to introduce her disorder right at the beginning of the musical. Still, it isn't an accurate reflection of her specific type of bipolar disorder. For audience members who do not know about bipolar disorder, this might give the wrong impression that a relatively stable woman with bipolar II would get carried away and exhibit such unhinged actions, similar to someone in a psychotic state. This gross misinterpretation, shown just at the top of the show, leaves an impression that might add to further stigma instead of building empathy for the character.

Although there are parts of the script that misrepresent bipolar disorder, specifically bipolar II, some argue that the issue isn't just about the writing but also Michael Grief's directorial decisions for the Broadway production. Seeing how Michael Longhurst, the director of the 2024 West End production, handled the portrayal of Diana and her journey, it's clear that there are many ways to go about staging and directing this musical. A director's decisions encompass more than just the acting choices but affect the entirety of the production.

The play did get some things right, for example, when Dr. Madden explains that people feel better and have energy before attempting or committing suicide and that severe delusions can involve hallucinations (although Dan seeing Gabe at the end is a plot device more than anything). However, since the majority of audience members will be laypeople when it comes to bipolar II, misrepresentation can influence how these theatergoers will think of the disorder after leaving the theatre.

There is another issue concerning the depiction of bipolar disorder in the musical: "It narrowly focuses on mental illness, *Next to Normal* inadvertently ignores the humanity and gifts of the psychosocially disabled person."[4] The musical only highlights the negative aspects of bipolar disorder. At the same time, some people with this diagnosis have proved to have exceptional, positive differences. Bipolar disorder entails the dysregulation of various neurotransmitter systems, such as serotonin and dopamine. These specific systems that affect the brain of a bipolar patient also play a part in creativity. In a hypomanic state, there is less inhibition and more energy to create, as well as accelerated thought processes that promote different ways of finding associations, heightened sensory perception, and an intense sense of emotion.

Some people also use creative methods as a coping mechanism during times of depression. There are a multitude of famous artists who have been documented to suffer from bipolar disorder, with the older artists having been retroactively assessed. These include Vincent van Gogh, Jackson Pollock, Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, Marilyn Monroe, Kurt Cobain, and many other notable artists. Research has "found that individuals in creative professions were significantly more likely to have bipolar disorder diagnoses, with writers showing particularly high rates—nearly 121% higher than control groups." A survey was conducted that found that 89% of people diagnosed with bipolar disorder working in a creative field said hypomania helps boost their creative output.[5] While this aspect of bipolar disorder doesn't have to be written into the character of Diana, giving her these positive attributes related to the disorder would do a service in making her seem more empathic and human.

The most problematic part of *Next to Normal* is also the most dangerous, which is how the different treatments for bipolar disorder are viewed solely through a negative lens. A large portion of the plot of the musical focuses on the treatments for Diana's bipolar disorder and the subsequent dismissal of said treatments like ECT. Diana's immense amount of retrograde amnesia is a plot device used to drive the second act of the musical, leading to different musical numbers like "Aftershocks" and "How Could I Ever Forget." However, this depiction of ECT causing a ridiculous amount of memory loss that results in forgetting about your own child might detract people living with bipolar disorder from getting treatment, especially for those who are already skeptical, to begin with. It is rare to find patients who lose anywhere near that level of memory due to ECT.

In the song "I Miss the Mountains," Diana recalls life before taking pills and missing the intense emotions that come with having untreated bipolar disorder.

“But I miss the mountains
I miss the dizzy heights
All the manic magic days
And the dark depressing nights
I miss the mountains
I miss the highs and lows...
I miss the pain.”

It is indeed very common for people with bipolar disorder to go off their medicine because of this very reason: they feel like they are not their true selves and don’t experience emotional sensations like they once did. Besides feeling “numbed” by medication, this play also alludes to the problem of sexual side effects from psychiatric medication, which is spoken about by Dan when Diana is medicated (it is never mentioned that this side effect can be dealt with). Suppose this musical is your introduction to antidepressants and mood stabilizers. In that case, it doesn’t highlight any of the benefits of taking the medications for you to understand. One benefit is that it assists people with bipolar disorder in a depressive state to stay stable and helps prevent them from suicidal ideation and action. With psychiatric medicine, there is give and take: in exchange for a stable life without the dangerous side of mania and depression, medication side effects must be managed.

In Diana’s song “The Break,” she questions whether the problem is in her brain or in her soul. Dr. Madden says to Diana: “The one thing for that’s sure is that there is no cure but that doesn’t mean we don’t fight.” Then he later sings, “Is medicine magic? You know that it's not. We know it's not perfect, but it's what we've got.” Diana makes up her mind to quit all treatment and go off on her own to figure things out for herself without support from professionals or her husband, which may or may not be a death sentence.

While yes, there are very rare cases in which some patients do not need medication depending on their specific case and lifestyle requirements, Diana’s decision to discontinue her medication in Act I led to the suicide attempt that landed her in a psychiatric hospital during the song "There's a World.” This suicidal episode proves that she absolutely needs to be medicated. It has already been proven that patients with bipolar disorder, on average, have a shorter lifespan than neurotypical people; it is not necessary to encourage them to stop psychiatric treatment instead of finding themselves and discovering their own cure.

Despite all the arguments, when I watched the West End Performance of *Next to Normal* on PBS, I enjoyed it very much and look forward to seeing it performed live someday. Due to the ending change, I appreciated this specific performance much more than I anticipated. I loved the score and found myself getting heavily involved in the storylines. The performances were inspired, directed masterfully, and the staging was inventive, particularly when Gabe was behind the glass wall when Diana couldn’t remember him anymore. I definitely agree with the masses that *Next to Normal* is an extremely well-crafted musical and is excellent in terms of entertainment value. However, the importance of accurate and responsible representation of mental illness cannot be overstated, especially when the production is lauded for bringing

awareness to mental health issues. The original production of *Next to Normal* might have had the best intentions. Still, it did damage to those who have bipolar disorder, both in how they are represented and in its message against professional treatments and psychiatric medicine.

Works Cited

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