

MADE TO DISORDER



No babies hatched this summer, including Prince George of Cambridge, have enjoyed a fonder welcome. The new musical *Neurosis* beat out all the competition in the 2012 inaugural season of *The Pitch*, the pet project of Finger Lakes Musical Theatre Festival producing director Ed Sayles. *The Pitch* is where music professionals come to sell local audiences on ideas for new shows, and the prize is a professionally staged production under the banner of the Finger Lakes festival, whose standards exceed those of most off-Broadway houses.

Over the last year *Neurosis* was workshopped at different venues prior to its world premiere at the Auburn Public Theater. In fact, the final draft of the script is dated “July 14, 2013.” Auburn bids to replace New Haven as the tryout town of choice.

The three young virtual unknowns who put *Neurosis* together arrived with promising credits and manifestly display complementary tastes and talents.

The name of librettist Allan Rice goes first, as he apparently thought up the driving idea. His writing credits include TV’s *The New Adventures of Old Christine*. A 30-year-old New York Jewish slacker, Frank (Danny Gardner), without job or girlfriend, converses with a kind of doppelganger/ Jiminy Cricket named *Neurosis* (Joseph Medeiros), never seen by other characters. He might be the title character, but the show is not about him but rather the advice he gives Frank—like shifting to an electric razor instead of using a blade and lather.

Romance is not far away as we meet golden-voiced Abby (Patricia Noonan), who also comes with an unseen companion: *Neurosalina* (Alexandrea Tocco), a dark-browed mean girl who is more disapproving than *Neurosis*. In Abby’s first number, “*Make Him Mine*,” the tall, willowy shiksa says she yearns for a Jewish boy because he would know about suffering. After Frank and Abby begin to harmonize, they hit a rough patch with the disapproval of Frank’s controlling mother, Geri (Joanne Baum).

Approaching a musical comedy through its book, however, is like speaking of P.G. Wodehouse’s *Anything Goes* or Thomas Meehan’s *Annie*. Composer Ben Green’s career has been linked with Laurence O’Keefe (*Batboy*, *Legally Blonde*), and like the older man he is witty, allusive and eclectic, as with the klezmer motifs in Abby’s “*Make Him Mine*.” The exuberant second-act showstopper, “*Meet-the-Parents Tango*,” could have been inspired by Lerner and Loewe’s “*The Rain in Spain*,” but comes with a sharper satirical bite.

In general, Green fits in with the classical Broadway idiom of the past several decades, but he knows rock just as well. He concludes the show with a big production number, pulling in themes from the whole score, and assigns it to a singer who had been an interesting subordinate: Samantha the psychiatrist (played by Merry-Go-Round Playhouse veteran Julie Cardia). That’s “*Rock Your Neurosis*,” with lines like, “*Why not confess/ Your head’s a mess/ ‘Cause, baby, you’re bizarre.*”

Although the *Syracuse New Times* was not present when *Neurosis* was pitched last summer, the demands of the format calls for individual songs to stand on their own without full dramatic context. If the show achieves the success that standing-ovation crowds crave in Auburn, the appeal will rest strongly on the dazzle of lyricist Greg Edwards’ tight collaboration with composer Green, regardless of how much they advance the plot. Edwards wants us to know he has a Phi Beta Kappa from Yale, but we hear other schooling in his words. He grew up with W.S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan and has been a close student of Cole Porter and John Kander and Fred Ebb.

His complex rhymes put one in mind of Ogden Nash’s lyrics for Kurt Weill’s *One Touch of Venus*. Consider Geri’s advice when she wants Frank to quit being like other time-wasters and go to law school: “*They’re searching for answers/ They’re racked by regret/ So they join a hippie commune/ Or a temple in Tibet/ But don’t you be a nudist/ You have your father’s figure/ And don’t you be a Buddhist/ You’re already short on hair/ The outlet I propose/ Turns amateurs to pros/ And God knows you’ll find your purpose if only you look there.*”

New York City-based director and choreographer Walter Ryon has been the coordinator of *The Pitch* series all along and brings a year’s experience with the text. His contributions could allow him to rank as a fourth collaborator, such as with several dance numbers, from tap to tango, and a lengthy visual gag in which Frank squirms while trying to look sexy on a tall stool at a singles’ bar. With producing director Ed Sayles’ blessings, this is an A-list production all the way, starting with veteran music director Mark Goodman’s vibrant five-player ensemble and Jason Bolen’s modernist but versatile set.

Nearly all the players are professionals with national credits, and if it weren’t for a fleeting joke about Cornell University, *Neurosis* could be taking place off-Broadway as is. Thin, lithe Danny Goodman (seen last summer in *Fingers and Toes*) makes Frank’s self-doubt look like a form of earnestness, especially when contrasted with his darker, frequently grimacing alter ego, Joseph Medeiros as *Neurosis*. Alexandrea Tocco as *Neurosalina*, a darker double for Abby, often seems to be bullying and tormenting the girl, simultaneously pulling off some of the saltiest gags, while Patricia Noonan’s Abby delivers the most powerful voice in the cast. Joanne Baum’s mother Geri turns the Sophie Portnoy-esque character into a scene-stealer, while Bob Frame’s dad Kenny bats .1000, getting a laugh with each of his short lines. Julie Cardia’s imposing shrink Samantha feels as though her role might have been expanded to

accommodate her presence.

Word on the street is that Neurosis is Friends as written by Woody Allen. Not quite. The Woodman always writes in a minor character who says she admired him or thinks he's a genius. Not here. This time your Neurosis is the best friend you could have.

This production runs through Aug. 18.