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# The Thrilling Fun Home Musical by Lisa Kron

## The Themes of the Play

"Welcome to our home on Maple Avenue." With this line, the Bechdel family brought the audience of the Ensemble Theatre along for a ride through their life. The story is told through the eyes of 49 year old Alison Bechdel as she finds herself unable to move forward without first looking back. Memories of her past that come to life on stage tell the story, in graphic, honest detail of Alison Bechdel growing up as the daughter of a closeted gay father and a distant mother in a small town in Pennsylvania. With music by Jeanine Tesori, book and lyrics by Tony Award-nominated Lisa Kron, and based on the graphic novel memoir by Alison Bechdel, Fun Home, is a groundbreaking musical about death, gender identity, and discovering the truth about a family's struggle to stay together.

Lisa Kron's vision for the show took Bechdel's memoir and restructured it for the stage. Bechdel originally structured her novel as a series of memories that almost loop around central main events. Kron's adaptation brought the 49 year old Alison on stage in the midst of writing her novel. This has Alison observing and commenting on her younger selves throughout the play and changing her perspective on how she viewed her parents. This is not the first time Kron has played with this theme of coming to terms with what we know and do not know. In one of her earlier works, Well, Kron focuses on her family's medical history and the neighborhood where she grew up in. She ties in themes of the unknown as well as loss and discovery into all her works. As Kron pointed out in an interview, most of her work ties directly into her life. So likewise, all her pieces drawn from this connected theme pool.

## Design

The production of Fun Home is adapted directly from Alison Bechdel's 2006 graphic memoir of the same name. So of course, the inspiration for the set dressings and design came directly from the Bechdel's novel. For Brian C. Mehring, the resident scenic and lighting designer for Ensemble, minimalism is a principle in his usual work. Working directly from the novel and from Kron's vision, he tones down the densely packed house depicted in Bechdel's childhood home. He states that overcrowding the stage takes away from the core elements of a show. Mehring had this to say about the design. 'I like the audience to fill in the blanks,' he says. 'I don't like to offend and over-decorate.' The design for the show was modeled to fit the Ensemble's main stage and felt as though it was meant to be performed on the gorgeous modified thrust. Mehring's designs are well known to the Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati, and are always built with great care and craftsmanship.

For this production he designed the set with numerous antiques and an in-house turntable provided by the CCM that delivered Helens's piano, coffins from the funeral home, and Alison's dorm room bed in quick succession. Scenes taking place in a moving car often are just comprised of the piano bench pulled to center stage with a soft spot focused on the passengers. This sort of blocking is in tune with Mehring's ideal minimalistic structured dressing and works well with focusing the audience's attention on the details of the intense conversations that happened on the car rides in the show. While still successful at not drawing too much attention

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around the stage, the minimal design of Mehrings set brings an all around antique laden, fussy mood throughout the entire performance, tying in the theme of discovery and restoration.

## Lighting

While being the resident scenic designer at the Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati, Brian C. Mehring is also the resident lighting designer. He creates fantastic scenic and mood changes through the use of general, practical, and effect lighting on the stage. Some of the effects that stood out to me was the wonderful creation of a reclaimed, warm mood through the antique blue glass sconces that lined the walls of the house. These sconces also changed from a cool tones when in the house, to a warmer, soft light for the funeral scenes. Mehring's clever use of black scrims as side walls on stage left and right also caught me off guard when young Alison was lit from through the wall by a small effect light during a scene where she watched a tv show on the floor. These lights were used a number of times to light various characters from different angles and were effective at creating a diverse lighting plot on stage during complex scenes. Another scene that really stands out for lighting design would be during Bruce Bechdel's final score. In Edges of the World, Bruce vocalizes his inner struggle with his sexuality and his failing to fix everything in his life. During this scene Bruce breaks down into a full emotional rage and fall to the floor, at this point, the stage switches to black with a soft follow spot for Bruce's face. As he nears the end of the scene the light begins to brighten and it splits into two, indicating headlights and the sound of a car horn can be heard approaching. The sound of the horn grew to a blaring tone, and then stopped, the lights go out and the scene ends with Bruce's death. This abrupt end to a very intense scene is very effective at bringing a solemn mood throughout the audience, I could almost feel the lament for Bruce resonate from the seats around me.

## The Main Character

While Bruce played a major role in the performance, the character development in Fun Home extends way beyond his obsession with his antiquities. The main character in the show is of course Alison Bechdel, but she did not act alone in this rendition of Bechdel's graphic novel. Bechdel is portrayed by three actresses in Fun Home: McKenna James Farmer is the confident 9-10 year old Alison at the beginning of the show. Emily Fink plays the newly 19 year old college student. And Natalie Bird portrays adult Alison, acting as the story's narrator and stepping in and out of the action throughout the play. Bird is often reading over the shoulders of her younger selves as they write down their thoughts in a diary, making comments and remembering memories of her past. All three actresses are excellent singers and compelling actors that when put together, bring a wonderful web of complexity of Alison's character.

Having three different actors play what is essentially the same role, just played over vast periods of time, can be a tricky thing to make seem cohesive, but I do believe that the Ensemble Theatre did so in a very simple way. In the costume design of each Alison, there was an obvious connection between the designs. Each actress bears a pair of black converse, jeans, and a red shirt of varying patterns. This type of dressing bring fluidity through passing of time, and while you might not notice these costume designs while the individual actors are on stage, your mind connects these decisions and it all reads as a young girl growing up through the years.

## Conclusion

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Fun Homes total running time was a little over one hour and thirty minutes. In that time, Alison Bechdel took the audience on a ride through her troubles in life surrounding her difficult relationship with her closeted gay father, topics of depression and anxiety, and her own self discovery as a queer woman. She spoke of the known and unknown as if they were one in the same. Along with the story line, the show was executed wonderfully. The set dressing, costumes, lighting, acting, sound design, and overall script had me pulled directly into that small town in Pennsylvania. The range of emotion portrayed in the production was a thrill to be apart of. The production of Fun Home is no longer in the Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati as of September 28, but if you can find a showing of it, I highly recommend the show to people of all ages to attend.

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