

# How to Dance in Ohio

**Jacob Yandura** music **Rebekah Greer Melocik** lyrics, book  
**Belasco Theatre, New York** 15 November 2023 – ongoing  
 REVIEWED ON 8 DECEMBER 2023



Broadway alums Darlesia Cearcy and Haven Burton as Johanna and Terry; Madison Kopec as Marideth (centre) with the diverse *How to Dance in Ohio* company

Charting the unlikely journey of seven young adults living on the autistic spectrum, *How to Dance in Ohio* focuses on their spring formal organised by the Columbus, Ohio-based counsellor who's been coaching them to live more independently. The show, based on a 2015 documentary of the same name, plays like an autism-focused version of the recent Broadway hit *The Prom*. There's a welcome sense of inclusivity to the endeavour – up top, the lead cast, all on the spectrum themselves, point out cool-down spaces in the Belasco Theatre where patrons can go if they feel overstimulated – but the show sometimes struggles to overcome the conventionality of its storytelling.

Jacob Yandura's bouncy score leans heavily on pop and Musical Theatre tropes – and shows some sophistication in ensemble numbers that boast overlapping lyrical phrases and rich harmonies. These are enhanced by some energetic dance routines from choreographer Mayte Natalio that seem mostly aspirational (particularly compared to the film's real-life counterparts).

Rebekah Greer Melocik's script expands on the documentary, particularly beefing up the role of centre founder Dr Amigo (Caesar Samayoa), who supplies a number of artificial conflicts that need to be resolved before the final curtain. He's the divorced dad of a college-age daughter (Cristina Sastre) who's thinking of abandoning a dance career to follow in his footsteps (an idea he bizarrely rejects); he also oversteps with a gifted engineering student Drew (Liam Pearce, with a beautiful tenor voice) who's reluctant to go to college out of state; and he has awkward encounters with two

journalists, one who pens an article full of condescending language, and the other who's teased as a possible rebound prospect until she gently turns him down. (None of these plot points are in the documentary.)

That's a lot of hyped-up conflict for one character. Dr Amigo seems to be the walking embodiment of how you don't have to be on

diversity extends beyond the neuro-kind. As one character points out: 'If you've met one autistic person, then you've met one autistic person.' In addition to college-bound Drew, we meet the fact-obsessed Marideth (Madison Kopec); non-binary Mel (Imani Russell), whose literal-mindedness frustrates their boss at a pet store; flamboyant cosplayer

Remy (Desmond Luis Edwards), who records fashion and make-up clips on his YouTube channel; the sweet-natured Tommy (Conor Tague), who teaches

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the spectrum to misread social cues – a point that you wish Melocik and Yandura had underscored with a confessional song that spells out that message. Instead, we get a feeble apology song before an uplifting finale.

The musical is on surer ground when it focuses on the actual promgoers, whose

himself to raise his eyebrows to show that he's interested in what others are saying; and longtime best friends Caroline (Amelia Fei) and Jessica (Ashley Wool), who delight in shopping together for the sparkly gowns they'll wear to the Big Event.

When director Sammi Cannold keeps these kids front and centre, using Robert Brill's simple set to shift between scenes, it all comes alive with a sense of compassionate discovery. In fact, you wish she had focused more on them – and on the particulars of their challenges. Caroline is flummoxed when her Japanese class is moved to a new room, for instance; she can't just roll with the punches. In many ways, the experience of autism is the polar opposite of live theatre, where performers can't possibly anticipate every deviation from what's been rehearsed. That makes the final number, with Drew and Marideth in a sweetly awkward embrace, all the more sweet. We know what they had to overcome to achieve that utterly conventional tableau.

Thom Geier

## Production credits

**Cast** Caesar Samayoa, Desmond Luis Edwards, Amelia Fei, Madison Kopec, Liam Pearce, Conor Tague, Ashley Wool, Imani Russell, Cristina Sastre, Darlesia Cearcy, Haven Burton *et al*

**Direction** Sammi Cannold

**Music direction** Lily King

**Choreography** Mayte Natalio

**Orchestrations** Bruce Coughlin

**Set** Robert Brill

**Lighting** Bradley King

**Sound** Connor Wang

**Costumes** Sarafina Bush

**Hair, wigs** Charles G LaPointe

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