

The Connector

Jason Robert Brown music, lyrics **Jonathan Marc Sherman** book
MCC Theater, Off Broadway, New York 12 January – 17 March 2024

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Words don't come cheap in *The Connector*: Max Crumm and members of the company; Scott Bakula pushes his prodigy Ben Levi Ross to go bigger and bolder

Flush from the Tony-winning revival of his musical *Parade*, Jason Robert Brown has produced one of his best scores for *The Connector* – an original project, with a script by Off-Broadway veteran Jonathan Marc Sherman, that casts a jaundiced eye on a perennial villain: the news media. Indeed, Sherman regurgitates elements of several real-life US journalism scandals from the 1990s to produce a warmed-over story about an Ivy-educated striver who sucks up to his bosses, condescends to his peers and invents both sources and facts to boost his career.

Ben Levi Ross, a former Evan Hansen on Broadway, brings a similar fidgety, restless-leg energy to the role of Ethan Dobson, a newly minted Princeton grad who charms the Old Boys running a venerable *Time*-like magazine called *The Connector*. The outlet's top editor, played with grizzled gravitas by Scott Bakula, is a Vietnam battlefield-tested journo who sees a bit of himself in young Ethan – while ignoring other young staffers like Robin Martinez (Hannah Cruz), a lowly copy editor who moved up from minor-league newspapers in Texas. And he pushes Ethan to go bigger, bolder, and more impactful with every new assignment. Big mistake.

Focusing so much on Ethan is also a misstep for the show. While Ross sings like a dream, with a clear tenor that rides comfortably along Brown's melody lines, his character comes off as a callous jerk from the start. Sherman and Brown make no attempt to understand him or what spurs him to lie so brazenly, even until the bitter end.

Musical Theatre has had antiheroes before, of course, but few show that megalomania emboldens them to suggest, in one song: 'God reached out to me!'

Ethan emerges as a one-dimensional avatar of bad journalism, a composite character lifted from decades-old case studies. He invents sources, as real-life Princeton grad Ruth Shalit was accused of doing for several US magazines; he makes up an incriminating videotape, as disgraced former *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair did; and he attempts to cover his tracks by having his brother pose as one of his made-up contacts, just like the notorious fabulist Stephen Glass (the inspiration for the 2003 Hayden Christensen biopic *Shattered Glass*).

“Brown, who conducts and plays piano, has crafted some gorgeous tunes for the show”

It's no accident that the standouts in the cast, who also represent its moral centre, are the women. Jessica Molaskey, as the magazine's head researcher, is blessed with the best song of the show, a strident defence of facts

in the midst of settling for squishier 'truths.' Mylinda Hull is a hoot as a pernickety reader, dismissively named Mona Bland, whose letters help unearth Ethan's fibs. And rising star Hannah Cruz is a vocal dynamo as Robin, a bundle of thwarted ambition and pre-*Lean In* femininity who's all too easily relegated to the periphery by her white, male bosses. In a cruel twist, her character is simply handed the material to expose Ethan rather than being allowed to dig it up herself. It's a shame that the real heroine is denied true agency here – some restructuring could unlock the potential of this story.

Despite the narrative flaws, director Daisy Prince's intermission-less production has a zippy punch. Beowulf

Boritt's set, with magazine layouts gridded on the back wall, Márión Talán de la Rosa's costumes and Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew's lighting and projections contribute to the '90s media vibe. The show also springs to life during set pieces built around some of Ethan's elaborate stories, like the profiles of an underground Scrabble champ and a generous American who secretly fulfils the wishes of people leaving prayers at Jerusalem's Western Wall. Another narrative number, in which a Black political operative (Fergie Philippe) raps about corruption in Jersey City, is a more cringey reminder that white composers of a certain age should probably avoid hip-hop motifs. But Brown, who conducts and plays piano in the six-piece band, has crafted some gorgeous tunes for this project, even punctuating one with the sound of ripping paper. It's an apt aural simile for the erosion of trust in the media that *The Connector* sharply chronicles.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Scott Bakula, Ben Levi Ross, Hannah Cruz, Jessica Molaskey, Fergie Philippe, Mylinda Hull, Daniel Jenkins, Max Crumm *et al*

Direction, conception Daisy Prince

Music direction Tom Murray

Orchestrations, arrangements Jason Robert Brown

Choreography Karla Puno García

Set Beowulf Boritt

Lighting, projections Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew

Sound Jon Weston

Costumes Márión Talán de la Rosa

Hair Krystal Balleza, Will Vicari