

The Notebook

Ingrid Michaelson music, lyrics **Bekah Brunstetter** book
Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre, New York 10 February 2024 – ongoing
 REVIEWED ON 9 MARCH 2024



In-love teenagers Allie (Tyson) and Noah (Cardoza); the three Noahs – Cardoza, Harewood and Vasquez; Maryann Plunkett as the older Allie, with Harewood

It was probably inevitable that Broadway would produce a musical version of *The Notebook*, Nicholas Sparks's bestselling romantic weepie that yielded a critically reviled but audience-beloved 2004 movie best remembered for Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams's steamy kiss in the rain. That scene is faithfully reproduced on the stage of the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre in a heartfelt, if musically bland, production that still has the power to reduce audiences to puddles of tears by the final curtain. (The merch stand sells mini tissue boxes with the show's logo for \$5.)

As with the book and movie, the plot is pretty rudimentary: an initially star-crossed romance between rich girl Allie and working-class guy Noah, separated by her snooty parents and his military enlistment, with a narrative frame involving an older man (Dorian Harewood) in a nursing home reading the story of this love affair aloud to a woman suffering from dementia (Maryann Plunkett).

Bekah Brunstetter's book smartly updates the material, moving the main story to the present (and sending our hero to Vietnam instead of World War Two) and providing a more detailed look at the ravages of memory loss on both the patient and the ones they love. But she also strips the story of conflict, relegating Allie's fiancé (Chase Del Rey) to the sidelines and downplaying Allie's past love of the piano (here, she's portrayed as a passionate painter). Unlike the movie, the play doesn't wait until the end to reveal that the older couple are the grown-up versions of the young lovers. That's fortunate, since co-directors Michael Greif and Schele Williams have cast two Black actresses to play the teenage and young adult Allie (Jordan Tyson and *SLX* alum Joy Woods) and two white actors to be their Noah counterparts (John Cardoza and *Hamilton*

alum Ryan Vasquez) – while Harewood is Black and Plunkett is white. It's a twist on colour-blind casting that caused befuddlement for several theatergoers near me – why does older Allie become white and Noah become Black (or is this a trick of her faulty memory)? But the staging, with all three couples together in many scenes, and Paloma Young's colour-coded costumes go a long way to reduce confusion.

“There are just enough winning songs to build up ballast for the heart-tugging finale”

Harewood and Plunkett are the emotional centre of the show, and each finds subtle ways to convey their mutual devotion as well as the separation wrought by disease – he radiates persistent ardour despite his halting stutter-step gait while she displays brief flashes of lucidity before retreating into cautious suspicion.

As the younger Noah, Cardoza brings an aw-shucks boyishness and crystalline voice, while Woods exudes an irrepressible star quality as the twentysomething Allie. She's also blessed with the show's most soaring solo numbers – and nails them vocally.

Singer-songwriter Ingrid Michaelson has crafted a pleasantly melodic score that fits easily into her indie-pop wheelhouse. Her strongest numbers focus on dementia's tragic toll, as in the duet 'I Wanna Go Back' that the two younger Allies sing to their older self with a simplicity that is

devastating: 'I didn't know that the last time / I'd leave the house / was the last time I'd leave the house.' Still, there's a sameness to the songs that holds the show back just when you hope it might take flight. Michaelson's lyrics seldom sparkle with poetry or wit, lacking the specificity to advance the plot or our connection to the characters.

Despite the missed opportunities, Michaelson studs the show with just enough winning songs to build up emotional ballast for the heart-tugging a cappella finale. Only those with hearts of stone could deny the story's melodramatic pull, which is rendered almost mythic by the simple set design (by David Zinn and Brett J Banakis) and projections (by Lucy Mackinnon) that gives us rough outlines of locations like Noah's rebuilt storybook house and an underused downstage wading pool meant to evoke the coastal mid-Atlantic setting. *The Notebook* ultimately emerges as the musical equivalent of a memory play, both for its sympathetic central couple and for theatergoers who've adopted this bittersweet love story as their own.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Maryann Plunkett, Dorian Harewood, Joy Woods, Ryan Vasquez, John Cardoza, Jordan Tyson, Andréa Burns *et al*
Direction Michael Greif, Schele Williams
Choreography Katie Spelman
Orchestrations John Clancy, Carmel Dean
Arrangements Ingrid Michaelson, Carmel Dean
Music direction Geoffrey Ko
Set David Zinn, Brett J Banakis
Costumes Paloma Young
Lighting Ben Stanton
Sound Nevin Steinberg
Hair, wigs Mia Neal
Projections Lucy Mackinnon

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