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O.K, let's wrap this one up and send it out where it can do the most good. Despite the downbeat subject of this message-heavy musical, Transport Group's sensitive take on teenage anorexia could lighten the load on any family caught in the destructive spiral of a child with an eating disorder. Jack Cummings III's severely stylish production addresses the entire family dynamic, using the intimacy of confessional songs to examine the complex psychological factors that compel a "normal" child to starve herself to death.

Cast adrift on John Story's stark white set of vertical flats and stripped bare of all defenses by R. Lee Kennedy's needle-nosed lighting, the Freeman family has nowhere to hide from the truth about itself. But that doesn't stop the Freemans from denying that something is seriously wrong with the family.

In the show's searing opening number, "Happy Family," Gayla Freeman, her hysteria barely under wraps in Barbara Walsh's strong performance, leads her spineless husband and screwed-up kids in a dissonant musical declaration that everything is just perfect in their ideal family.

Forget that Robert (Adam Heller) has given up on playing his paternal role ("Father Fantastic"). Don't think about the pressure on Gayla to find a job outside the home ("Racing"). Ignore young Zachary's (Nicholas Belton) attempts to talk about things that are upsetting him ("Breaking Things"). And for God's sake, don't anybody mention that Polly has stopped eating and is spending all her time alone in her room ("Pretty to the Bone").

The spare but articulate score provides a musical release for each character to drop the burden of denial and open up. These individual moments are painful, and the collective impact is devastating -- bearable only because Yvonne Adrian's book takes such care to go beyond the pain to offer real insight into the family dynamics behind Polly's seemingly irrational behavior.

Does this show resolve anything? Not really, and the ending is a real emotional cliffhanger. But it's rare to see such a compassionate, nonjudgmental attempt to examine why some families refuse to acknowledge that anything is amiss in their domestic paradise -- and why some children just can't swallow that lie.



You can't accuse Transport Group of playing it safe. The troupe's last production, the acclaimed musical *The Audience*, dealt entirely with the reactions of the theatergoers watching the show.

Now comes *Normal* a feel-good musical about a teenage girl with an eating disorder. And while it's occasionally prone to ponderousness, it ultimately shows that any subject, if handled right, is grist for the musical mill.

The main character in the piece is ultimately not Polly (Erin Leigh Peck), the anorexic, but her indomitable mother, Gayla (Barbara Walsh), who finds herself fighting for her daughter's life as she copes with such conundrums as "Cooking for the Starving," as one number puts it.

The musical relates its story mainly through song as it depicts the internal tensions suffered by the family, which also includes perplexed father Robert (Adam Heller) and older brother Zachary (Nicholas Belton), as they all struggle to help Polly survive. A trio of actresses (Nancy Johnston, Toni DiBuono, and Shannon Polly) enact numerous other characters who figure in the story, including doctors and nurses. Director Jack Cummings III's stylized production, performed on a mostly bare stage bathed in white light, has an almost clinical feel as it dissects the various aspects of the situation, one that has come to affect so many teenage girls in particular.

While the show is ultimately more notable for its thematic rather than creative aspects, the score by Tom Kochan (music) and Cheryl Stern (lyrics) is impressively sophisticated, and Yvonne Adrian's book handles the difficult topic with sensitivity and welcome dashes of humor.

The performers invest their characterizations with great heart, with particularly moving work by Peck as the troubled teen and Walsh as her dedicated mom.

*Normal* may not be a normal musical, but it is well worth seeking out.