



## Review: PYGmalion's â??Tiny Beautiful Thingsâ?• â?? Writing as Empathy and Witness

### Description

**SALT LAKE CITY, UT** â?? Walking out of PYGmalion Theatre Company's production of *Tiny Beautiful Things*, I was more emotionally affected than I expected to be. Based on Cheryl Strayed's â??Dear Sugarâ?• advice columns and adapted for the stage by Nia Vardalos, the play doesn't simply dramatize a collection of letters; it brings their humanity to life in a way that feels immediate, intimate, and profoundly honest.

*Tiny Beautiful Things* invites the audience into Sugar's world, where strangers write in with their grief, confusion, and longing. These letters are threaded together with Sugar's responses, which are vulnerable, wise, and deeply humane. The adaptation constructs a mosaic of voices, with three actors representing multiple correspondents as Sugar provides narrative cohesion. In place of a traditional plot, the work centers empathy as its organizing principle, foregrounding listening and witnessing as sites of meaning-making.

A man sitting on a couch with a notebook and pen, looking thoughtful and slightly stressed, in a cozy Matt Bennett plays a letter writer in PYGmalion Theatre Company's production of â??Tiny Beautiful Things.â?? PC: PYGmalion Theatre Company.

### Real-Life Origins and Emotional Truth

What makes this play so powerful is that it isn't fiction. Between 2010 and 2012, Cheryl Strayed anonymously wrote *The Rumpus*'s â??Dear Sugarâ?• advice column, responding to letters from readers who bared their deepest struggles. She wrote without pay and without her name attached, offering not advice in the conventional sense but compassion rooted in her own lived experience: the death of her mother, divorce, infidelity, poverty, and even her brief use of heroin in her twenties. She trusted anonymity as a kind of freedom, revealing everything but her face. When Strayed's identity was finally made public, it became clear that â??Sugarâ?• had been offering something much larger than adviceâ??she had been modeling empathy as a form of care.

Vardalos's adaptation rearranges and condenses the letters for the stage, but it preserves their raw emotional truth. The words we hear are almost entirely Strayed's own, spoken by actors who embody the ache and resilience of the unseen letter writers. The theatrical frame—a domestic space, a kitchen—becomes a visual metaphor for the emotional labor of listening and the quiet work of holding each other's pain through grief.

A quote from *Tiny Beautiful Things* by Cheryl Strayed: 'You cannot convince people to love you. T

## A Unique Emotional Experience

What struck me most was how the live performance created a sense of immediate emotional connection. I'd gone in expecting a thoughtful but perhaps straightforward adaptation. Instead, I left feeling like I'd just been part of a conversation—one that made me want to learn more about the entire *Tiny Beautiful Things* universe. I even spent the next day diving into the mini-series adaptation, only to realize just how different each medium is. The book, the show, and the live performance each offer their own unique emotional layers—but seeing it live is something special.

The set was simple—various corners of a home spread across the stage, grounded by four pillars inscribed with words from Strayed's book. These pillars symbolize the letters and the weight of the stories shared, grounding the audience in the world of Sugar's advice column.



Actress Tamara Howell plays Sugar in PYGmalion Theatre Company's production of "Tiny Beautiful Things." PC: PYGmalion Theatre Company.

## Performance Highlights

Tamara Howell, who plays Sugar, is the heart of the show. She brings warmth and authenticity to the role that makes every piece of advice feel personal and profoundly human. The ensemble

castâ??Stephanie Howell, Ali Lente, and Matthew Ivan Bennettâ??does a remarkable job embodying a wide range of characters, often switching genders and personalities seamlessly. Matt Bennett, in particular, delivers a standout moment as a grieving father, bringing extraordinary depth of emotion that is matched beautifully by Tamara Howellâ??s heartfelt response as Sugar.

## Direction & Staging

Tamara Howellâ??s dual role as both lead actress and director brings a deep personal investment to the production, supported by associate director and costumer **Madison Howell Wilkins** and PYGmalionâ??s long-time collaborators. Itâ??s always a gamble for a lead actor to direct, but in this case, the risk pays off. Howellâ??s collaboration with Wilkins adds balance and credibility, resulting in direction that strikes a careful equilibrium between stillness and motionâ??a space that feels both lived-in and luminous.

The home-like set, designed by **Allen Smith**, evokes quiet domestic intimacyâ??kitchen counters, soft lighting, and simple furniture that draw us into Sugarâ??s inner life. **Pilar Davisâ??s** lighting design and **Mikal Troy Kleeâ??s** subtle soundscape breathe rhythm into each letter, shifting mood with every confession. I appreciated how intentional the placement of silence was, and how the gentle use of guitar music brought levity to the transitionsâ??arriving just when the audience needed to exhale after a heavy scene. **Jennie Pett**, who also stage manages and operates lights, keeps each transition seamless, allowing the emotional tempo of the letters to remain uninterrupted. Together, the creative team builds a space where the act of empathy itself becomes theatrical.



Ali Lente plays a letter writer in PYGmalion Theatre Company's production of *Tiny Beautiful Things*. PC: PYGmalion Theatre Company.

## What the Play Is Really About

*Tiny Beautiful Things* is not just a play about grief—it is about what we do with each other's grief. It reminds us that empathy is not merely a feeling but a deliberate act: the choice to listen, to stay, and to hold our own or another person's pain without trying to fix it. Sugar never offers perfect answers. Instead, she meets people exactly where they are, drawing from her own losses to offer honesty rather than certainty.

Sugar listens to people who feel they have no one else to turn but a stranger on the internet. That truth sits heavy: that so many carry their pain in silence until they hand it to someone they will never meet. Sometimes, what people need most is exactly what Sugar offers in this play—someone who will simply listen and bear witness, affirming that their truth is valid.

A quote from *Tiny Beautiful Things* by Cheryl Strayed, stating: 'But the reality is we often become

The play returns to the idea that falling apart is how we find ourselves, but it also suggests something quieter and deeper: sometimes we find ourselves because someone else is willing to sit with us in the falling apart. The letters are raw in their vulnerability, and while a few moments lean toward the idealized, the writing remains deeply authentic, generous, and profoundly human. As Nia Vardalos writes in her note for the program, 'As I read the letters exchanged, I wept, smiled, and was astonished by the raw and extraordinary candor. Sugar and the writers of the letters reveal themselves—and we find ourselves in their conundrums and sorrows.' That sentiment encapsulates what this production achieves: it reminds us that storytelling, at its most honest, is both mirror and balm.

A woman standing in a kitchen, wearing a black apron over a green sweater, holding a striped cup  
Stephanie Howell plays a letter writer in PYGmalion Theatre Company's production of *Tiny Beautiful Things*. PC: PYGmalion Theatre Company.

## Content & Sensitivity Notes

It's worth mentioning that the play doesn't shy away from heavy themes. There's a lot of swearing, and some of the letters deal with intense issues like familial violence or loss. If those topics are triggering, this might not be the show for everyone. But there's also a lot of humor and lightness woven in, and the cast uses the stage in clever ways—like a hilarious scene of trying to touch toes across the kitchen or chopping cucumbers frantically.

In an article by Salt Lake Magazine, Tamara Howell says:

'I hope that people will be moved that they will laugh some, and feel connected. One of the throughlines [of this play] is that every one of those letter writers is trying to connect in a human way, maybe because they didn't have anyone else to go to! I hope people in the audience feel a little less alone and a little less disconnected after seeing our play.' True to PYGmalion Theatre Company's mission to share the human experience through the eyes of women, *Tiny Beautiful Things* does more than tell stories—it invites its audience into acts of care.

A quote from 'Tiny Beautiful Things' by Cheryl Strayed, with light pink flower petals at the bottom. The

## Final Reflection: theatre as emotional witness

*Tiny Beautiful Things* is theatre as emotional witness. It reminds us that writing can be an act of empathy—a way of saying, “I see you, and I can hold this with you right now.” In the hands of PYGmalion Theatre Company, it becomes an invitation to do the same: to listen more deeply, to speak more honestly, and to remember that we are, all of us, both letter writer and Sugar. This is some of the best acting I’ve seen all year—raw, honest, and deeply felt. It’s a powerful reminder of the emotional cost of this kind of work, and the artistry it takes to sustain it night after night.

## Show Information *Tiny Beautiful Things*

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### Venue

Leona Wagner Black Box Theatre  
Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center  
138 West 300 South  
Salt Lake City, UT 84101

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## Run Dates & Select Performances

November 7–22, 2025

Upcoming public performances include:

- Sunday, November 9 at 2:00 p.m.
  - Thursday, November 13 at 7:30 p.m.
  - Friday, November 14 at 7:30 p.m.
  - Saturday, November 15 at 4:00 p.m.
  - Sunday, November 16 at 2:00 p.m.
  - Thursday, November 20 at 7:30 p.m.
  - Friday, November 21 at 7:30 p.m.
  - Saturday, November 22 at 4:00 p.m.
- (Limited seating is noted for several performances.)
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## Tickets

- Adult General Admission: \$26.50 (\$22.50 + \$4.00 fees)
  - Student/Senior: \$21.50 (\$17.50 + \$4.00 fees)
- General admission seating. Wheelchair-accessible seats available upon request during purchase.
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## Production Credits

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## **Tiny Beautiful Things** [Program](#)

Based on the book by Cheryl Strayed

Adapted for the stage by Nia Vardalos

Co-conceived by Marshall Heyman, Thomas Kail, and Nia Vardalos

**Director:** Tamara Howell

**Associate Director & Costumer:** Madison Howell Wilkins

**Stage Manager & Light Operator:** Jennie Pett

**Set Design:** Allen Smith

**Soundscape Design:** Mikal Troy Klee

**Lighting Design:** Pilar Davis

### **Cast:**

- **Tamara Howell** â?? Sugar
- **Matthew Ivan Bennett** â?? Letter Writer
- **Stephanie Howell\*** â?? Letter Writer
- **Alison Lente** â?? Letter Writer  
(Member of Actorsâ?? Equity Association)

**Running Time:** Approximately 90 minutes. No intermission.

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## **Run Time**

Approximately 90 minutes. No intermission.

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## **Content Advisory**

This production contains strong language and explores mature themes including grief, abuse, miscarriage, child loss, and addiction. Recommended for adult audiences. No infants. All audience members must have a ticket.

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## **Accessibility**

The Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center is fully ADA-accessible.

- Wheelchair-accessible seating and companion seats are available when booking.
- Accessible drop-off is located in front of the theatre; elevator access and ADA parking are available in the attached garage.
- ADA-compliant restrooms are available inside the venue.
- Assistive listening devices may be requested from the box office.
- Service animals are welcome.

For accessibility requests, contact:

**Phone:** 801-355-ARTS (2787)

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Email: [arttix@slco.org](mailto:arttix@slco.org)

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## Box Office & Contact

### ArtTix / Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center

- Phone: 801-355-ARTS (2787)
- Email: [arttix@slco.org](mailto:arttix@slco.org)
- Tickets & info: [www.arttix.org](http://www.arttix.org)

### PYGmalion Productions

- Email: [info@pygmalionproductions.org](mailto:info@pygmalionproductions.org)
  - Website: [www.pygmalionproductions.org](http://www.pygmalionproductions.org)
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PYGmalion's 2025-26 season continues with *Becky Nurse of Salem* by Sarah Ruhl (Feb. 6-21, 2026), directed by Morag Shepherd, followed by the world premiere of Andrea Danee Peterson's *(plan C)* (May 1-16, 2026).

## About the Playwright (Adaptor): Nia Vardalos

**Nia Vardalos** (b. 1962) is a Canadian-born actor, writer, and director best known for *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Oscar-nominated for Best Original Screenplay; Golden Globe-nominated for Best Actress). An alum of Second City, she adapted *Tiny Beautiful Things* for the stage and originated Sugar at The Public Theater (2016, 2017), later reprising the role at Pasadena Playhouse (2019). Her screen credits as writer/actor/director include *Connie and Carla*, *I Hate Valentine's Day*, and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding 2 & 3*. She is also an advocate for adoption and author of the memoir *Instant Mom*.

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## About the Author & Source Material: Cheryl Strayed & *Tiny Beautiful Things*

**Cheryl Strayed** (b. 1968) is the author of the novel *Torch*; the memoir *Wild* (an international bestseller adapted into the 2014 film starring Reese Witherspoon); *Tiny Beautiful Things*; and *Brave Enough*. *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar* (2012) collects Strayed's anonymous "Dear Sugar" columns from **The Rumpus**, blending memoir and advice with radical empathy and candor. The book became a *New York Times* bestseller, later inspiring Vardalos's stage adaptation (developed with Thomas Kail and Marshall Heyman) and a 2023 Hulu mini-series starring Kathryn Hahn. Strayed also co-hosted the **Dear Sugars** podcast with Steve Almond and hosts **Sugar Calling**.

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