



â??You Still Matterâ??: Pioneer Theatre Companyâ??s â??Dear Evan Hansenâ?• Hits a Nerve in Utah

Description

SALT LAKE CITY, UTâ?? My first encounter with *Dear Evan Hansen* came through the 2021 film adaptation, which left me ambivalent. The emotional proportions felt off-balance, as though the narrative wanted me to lean too closely into Evanâ??s loneliness without fully acknowledging the harm his actions cause. It suggested that intention could soften impactâ??that grief might be rearranged into something tidy or redemptive. I left unsure whether I was supposed to feel moved or manipulated.

But I also knew how deeply this story resonates for manyâ??including my teenager. We even have the *novelization* at home: ***Dear Evan Hansen* by Val Emmich, with Pasek, Paul, and Levenson**. The novel is unusual in that it was written *after* the musical. It slows the pace of the story and expands what the stage must compress, particularly by granting Connor Murphy (played by **Jordan Briggs**) interiority. On the page, Connor is not a symbol or plot deviceâ??he has memory, contradiction, voice. The novel holds what the musical sometimes cannot linger on: the unfinishedness of a person who did not get to stay.

Which is why Pioneer Theatre Companyâ??s productionâ??the first Utah staging of this Tony Awardâ??winning musicalâ??caught me off guard, in the best way.

A scene from the musical 'Dear Evan Hansen' featuring four characters seated around a blue table, *Andrew Samonsky, Elyse Bell, Marika Aubrey, and Jordan Briggs* | Credit: BW Productions

Context Matters: Utahâ??s Emotional Landscape

Director **Karen Azenberg** approaches the material with a clear ethical awareness of place. Utah has one of the highest teen suicide rates in the U.S., and Azenberg has spoken openly about staged grief in an era of digital loneliness. Her direction does not sentimentalize or sanitize. It does not absolve Evan. It does not villainize Connor. It sits in discomfort: Harm can be real. Loneliness can be real. Both can shape choices we are not proud of. This production centers recognition over redemption, presence over sentiment, and the fragile work of connection over the fantasy of closure.

Three young men sit on a blue sofa, engaged in a conversation around a laptop. One is sitting cross

Larry Saperstein, Kyle Dalsimer, and Jordan Briggs | Credit: BW Productions

Connor Returns to the Center

The clearest expression of this shift comes in the restoration of the song "Disappear." In the film, Connor (**Jordan Briggs**) functions largely as shadow, catalyst, ghost. Here, Jordan Briggs gives Connor an emotional through-line. Not haunting. Witnessing.

The imagined conversations between Evan and Connor are not hallucinations; they are memory-work, the mind trying to understand itself by reconstituting someone it failed to know while they were alive. The song insists that Connor's life held meaning independent of narrative usefulness, as Connor insists to Evan, "You still matter!"

This production, like the novel, refuses to let Connor be reduced to narrative function. It treats him as someone whose life meant something before and beyond its ending.

Two boys were falling at the same time—one who didn't survive, and one who is still learning to.

It recenters the musical's moral axis.

*A young man sitting on a bed, focused on a laptop, with a cardboard cutout of a character in the background
Kyle Dalsimer | Credit: BW Productions*

Grief in Parallel, Not in Harmony

This reframing deepens the emotional clarity of "Requiem." The Murphys do not grieve together. They grieve in orbit.

- **Marika Aubrey's** Cynthia mourns the son she hoped Connor might someday become.
- **Andrew Samonsky's** Larry mourns the son he could not reach.
- **Elyse Bell's** Zoe refuses to rewrite the reality of her brother simply because he is gone.

No one's grief corrects or mirrors another's. Grief here is plural, not shared.

This clarity makes "To Break in a Glove" land with devastating tenderness. The scene is not about baseball. It is about the emotional vocabulary fathers are taught and the emotional restraint sons inherit as survival.

The Men: Grief, Deflection, Survival

Kyle Dalsimer's Evan is remarkable for his refusal to varnish discomfort. A two-time Helen Hayes Award winner (including history-making recognition as the youngest performer to win twice in the Lead Performer category), Dalsimer brings a physical and vocal vocabulary that feels lived—not staged. The hesitations, the breath-catches, the way the body folds in on itself—none of it reads as performance psychology. He allows Evan to be difficult to witness, which is what makes him real.

Jordan Briggs (*Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*) as Connor is tense, searching, unfinished—not tragic ornamentation. A dynamic actor, Briggs plays the internal spaces—the almosts—the held breath, the parts of a person that never got to grow. The result is not a ghost haunting the narrative, but a presence insisting on being remembered as someone who mattered before and beyond his ending.

Andrew Samonsky (*Lempicka*) plays Connor's dad Larry with a masculinity built from gesture rather than language. His restraint is vulnerability.

Larry Saperstein (*High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* on Disney+) as Jared brings humor that never leaves the emotional stakes. His jokes are armor, not distance.

A scene from the musical 'Dear Evan Hansen' featuring two characters sitting on a blue couch, engaged in conversation.
Kyle Dalsimer and Donna Vivino | Credit: BW Productions

The Women Who Refuse to Disappear

Heidi, played by **Donna Vivino** (Elphaba in the National Broadway Tour of *Wicked*, and the original Young Cosette in *Les Misérables*), becomes the emotional still point of the production. In "So Big/So Small," she does not collapse, scold, or retreat. She stays. Vivino plays Heidi not as a martyr and not as a parent who has failed, but as someone who has spent years loving a child she cannot always reach. The song is not triumph—it is endurance. It is love shaped by survival.

With the phenomenal accompaniment of the eight-piece orchestra, led by Helen Gregory and featuring keyboard, strings, guitar, bass, and drums, this song soars. And yes—this is the moment that breaks the room open. You can feel every breath shift toward her. It is the kind of quiet heartbreak that doesn't ask for tears, but earns them anyway. Heidi is not alone in this. This production understands that *Dear Evan Hansen* is filled with women who are asked to hold more than they can carry—and who do not disappear under that weight.

Marika Aubrey brings a layered, unsentimental depth to Cynthia Murphy. Many productions flatten Cynthia into a single emotional note—either brittle denial or consuming guilt. Aubrey refuses both. Her Cynthia is a woman trying to hold grief in a shape she can survive. Her voice carries a forward-leaning ache, as if she is always half a breath ahead of the present moment, trying to keep Connor close by sheer force of wanting.

Zoe, played by **Elyse Bell**, sings with a warm, textured, unvarnished tone—the kind of voice that sounds *lived rather than trained*. She does not resolve the story for anyone else. She is someone still building herself.

Alana, played by **Khadija E. Sankoh**, enters composed, competent, and unshakeable. But when she says, "I know what it feels like to be invisible," the room stills. Sankoh reveals that visibility is not performance—it is survival.

Together, these performances remind us that survival is a shared practice, even when we can't see or understand it. Perhaps most of all in the moments when we feel alone.

A scene from the production of *Dear Evan Hansen* featuring multiple characters interacting on stage.
Larry Saperstein, Kyle Dalsimer, and Khadija E. Sankoh | Credit: BW Productions

The World Compresses and Then Breathes

Bryce Cutler's scenic and media design layers the spaces of the play—home, school, digital life—into a compressed emotional architecture.

Paul Miller's lighting makes interior life visible. Shadows sharpen, soften, or recede depending on who is holding the weight in the moment.

Patrick Holt's costumes look *lived*, not constructed.

This staging of *You Will Be Found* exposes the ease with which care becomes performance. The scene warns against mistaking visibility for connection, volume for intimacy. When the lights fade, a single tree remains—plain and unmoving—insisting on a slower, quieter form of presence than the one offered by the crowd.

A scene from the musical 'Dear Evan Hansen' featuring multiple actors on stage in front of a large, c
Credit: BW Productions

The Ethic

This production understands something urgent:

It is more important to say "I want you here" than to catalog the mistakes someone has made.

Harm matters. Accountability matters. But absence cannot be repaired. Only presence can. *Dear Evan Hansen* is too often framed as a story about redemption. This production knows it is a story about **staying**. Staying when connection is messy. Staying when grief is unfinished. Staying when love is not simple or cinematic. The staying—shaky, unpolished, fiercely human—is what breaks the heart. And then, gently, begins to mend it.

Acknowledgment

This review is written with awareness of the ongoing impact of suicide, depression, and loneliness in Utah, particularly among young people. If this story touches something tender for you, support is available through the SafeUT app, the 988 Lifeline, or trusted community care.

You matter.

You still matter.

and

Cast

Evan Hansen ??? Kyle Dalsimer
Connor Murphy ??? Jordan Briggs
Zoe Murphy ??? Elyse Bell
Cynthia Murphy ??? Marika Aubrey

Larry Murphy ??? Andrew Samonsky
Alana Beck ??? Khadija E. Sankoh
Jared Kleinman ??? Larry Saperstein
Heidi Hansen ??? Donna Vivino

Ensemble: Rachel Johnson, Adam Moore

Cast and crew members for the musical 'Dear Evan Hansen,' featuring headshots of the actors in co

Creative Team

Director & Choreographer: Karen Azenberg
Music Director / Conductor: Helen Gregory
Scenic & Video Designer: Bryce Cutler
Costume Designer: Patrick Holt
Lighting Designer: Paul Miller
Sound Designer: Aaron Hubbard
Hair & Makeup Designer: Savanna Finley
Associate Director / Choreographer: Maggie Scott
Stage Manager: James O. Hansen
Assistant Stage Manager: *Check PTC final program to confirm name here*
Casting: Geoff Josselson, CSA

Presented by: Pioneer Theatre Company
Artistic Director: Karen Azenberg

Show Info: *Dear Evan Hansen*

WHAT: *Dear Evan Hansen*
Book: Steven Levenson
Music & Lyrics: Benj Pasek & Justin Paul
Directed & Choreographed by: Karen Azenberg
Music Direction: Helen Gregory

WHERE: Simmons Pioneer Memorial Theatre
Pioneer Theatre Company • University of Utah Campus
Salt Lake City, Utah

WHEN: October 24 ??? November 8, 2025

PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE:

- Monday–Thursday • 7:00 PM
- Friday & Saturday • 7:30 PM
- Saturday Matinee • 2:00 PM
(No Sunday performances)

RUNTIME: 2 hours 35 minutes, including one 15-minute intermission.

ASL-INTERPRETED PERFORMANCES:

- Monday, **November 3** at 7:00 PM
- Thursday, **November 6** at 7:00 PM

TICKETS:

- Standard pricing varies by seating section.
- Curtain Call for All (Name-Your-Own-Price beginning at \$15) is available for every performance by phone only at 801-581-6961.
- **Halloween Performance Special:** 2-for-1 tickets on October 31 at 7:30 PM with code SINCERELYTWO.

ACCESSIBILITY:

- T-coil hearing enhancement receivers available at coat check (first-come, first-served).
- Accessible seating available; contact the box office for arrangements.

BOX OFFICE: 801-581-6961 • PioneerTheatre.org

Hours: Monday–Friday, 10:00 AM–6:00 PM

Tickets also sold one hour before showtime at the theatre.

ADVISORY:

Dear Evan Hansen lives in the emotional territory of loneliness, depression, and the longing to be seen. The story includes frank references to teen suicide, anxiety, and self-harm, as well as scenes involving bullying and strained family dynamics. None of these themes are presented for shock value; they are treated with seriousness, care, and nuance.

What may be helpful to know going in is that the musical does not resolve these struggles with a single moment of redemption or clarity. Instead, it holds space for the unfinished work of staying alive—often quietly, imperfectly, and alongside others who are also learning how to stay.

If these experiences are part of your life, you may feel tenderness, recognition, or discomfort in different measure. Take breaks as you need to. Unclench your jaw. Breathe. Check in with the body you brought to the theater tonight.

And if the story lands in a way that stirs something open, please know there is no expectation to process that alone.

Sources

Jones, Valerie. "Dear Evan Hansen" is making its Utah premiere with a timely message for the state. • *Deseret News*, October 24, 2025.

<https://www.deseret.com/entertainment/2025/10/24/dear-evan-hansen-has-utah-premiere-2025/>.

Emmich, Val, Benj Pasek, Justin Paul, and Steven Levenson. *Dear Evan Hansen*. New York: Poppy/Little, Brown, 2018.

Utah Department of Health. "Suicide Complete Health Indicator Report." • *IBIS-PH*. Accessed 2025. https://ibis.utah.gov/ibisph-view/indicator/complete_profile/SuicDth.html.

America's Health Rankings. "Teen Suicide in Utah." • *United Health Foundation*. Accessed 2025. https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/measures/teen_suicide/UT.

Staley, Michael J. *Suicide Among Youth in Utah: Youth (Ages 10-17) Suicide Rates by State*. Utah Office of the Medical Examiner, 2022. <https://le.utah.gov/interim/2022/pdf/00003745.pdf>.

Category

1. Reviews
2. Musicals

Tags

1. Aaron Hubbard
2. Affect Theory
3. Andrew Samonsky
4. Bryce Cutler
5. Connection Matters
6. Dear Evan Hansen
7. Donna Vivino
8. Elyse Bell
9. Embodied Knowledge
10. Geoff Josselson
11. Grief and Presence
12. Helen Gregory
13. James O. Hansen
14. Jordan Briggs
15. Karen Azenberg
16. Khadija E. Sankoh
17. Khadija Sankoh
18. Kyle Dalsimer
19. Larry Saperstein
20. Live Theatre
21. Loneliness and Love
22. Maggie Scott
23. Marika Aubrey
24. Mental Health Matters
25. Musical Theatre

default watermark

- 26. Patrick Holt
- 27. Paul Miller
- 28. performance as archive
- 29. Pioneer Theatre Company
- 30. PTC
- 31. Rhetorical Listening
- 32. Salt Lake Theatre
- 33. Savanna Finley
- 34. SLC arts
- 35. Theatre Review
- 36. Utah Arts
- 37. Utah theatre
- 38. You Are Not Alone
- 39. You Still Matter

Date

2026/03/16

Date Created

2025/10/25

Author

keola06

default watermark