



***Dear Evan Hansen* and the Evolution of Contemporary Broadway**

By Matt Schaefer

Dear Evan Hansen has become a modern classic of the musical theatre cannon for a reason. Its story connects with people across the demographic spectrum.

There are musicals built around spectacle, nostalgia, or familiar stories, and then there are shows that leave audiences emotionally altered long after the curtain falls. *Dear Evan Hansen* belongs firmly in the second category. More than a coming-of-age story or a contemporary Broadway hit, it is a heartfelt exploration of loneliness, connection, mental health, and the universal desire to feel seen.

Not a Perfect Hero, Just a Human One

At its core, *Dear Evan Hansen* is about people trying to belong. It follows Evan, an anxious and isolated teenager whose desperate need for connection leads him into increasingly complicated choices after the death of a classmate. What makes the show compelling is not that Evan is perfect, he is decidedly not, but that his flaws are painfully recognizable. His mistakes grow from fear, insecurity, and the longing to matter to someone, anyone.

That emotional honesty is what separates the musical from lighter teen-oriented productions. The book and score refuse to reduce the characters to stereotypes or easy moral lessons. Instead, the show examines the difficulty of communication between parents and children, the pressure of social expectations, and the quiet suffering many people carry without anyone noticing. The result is a story that feels startlingly personal, even for audience members whose lives look nothing like Evan's.

The Internet Has Never Looked Like This Onstage

One of the musical's greatest strengths is its portrayal of modern isolation in the digital age. Social media is not simply a backdrop in *Dear Evan Hansen* it functions almost like another character. Through projections of emails, tweets, and online commentary flooding the stage, the production captures how quickly stories spread and spiral beyond anyone's control. The internet becomes both a source of comfort and a source of overwhelming pressure. It amplifies connection while also exposing vulnerability, criticism, and performative empathy.

That theme resonates strongly because the musical understands something many people experience but struggle to articulate: the contradiction of feeling invisible in a hyperconnected world. Songs like "Waving Through a Window" transform anxiety and alienation into something tangible. Rather than simply advancing the plot, the music acts as an emotional translation of thoughts many people have had but rarely say aloud.

The Grammy-Winning Score Behind the Phenomenon

The score by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul is a major reason the show has had such a lasting impact. Their songwriting blends contemporary pop sensibilities with emotional specificity, creating songs that feel immediate and deeply personal. The lyrics are often conversational and direct, but that simplicity becomes a strength. Audience members frequently recognize themselves in the music because the emotions are expressed with clarity rather than abstraction.

The pair's talent lies in writing emotion-first songs. They identify what a character cannot openly say and transform it into music that feels intimate and universal at the same time. Numbers like "You Will Be Found" became cultural touchstones because they tapped into a widespread longing for reassurance and connection. For many viewers, the show helped normalize conversations around anxiety, depression, and emotional struggle in ways that felt sincere rather than performative.

The Roles You Didn't See Coming

Another reason the musical stands out is its nuanced treatment of adults. Too often, parents in stories about teenagers are reduced to obstacles or caricatures. In *Dear Evan Hansen*, the mothers at the center of the story are complex, exhausted, loving, and imperfect people trying to hold their families together. They are not authority figures who “just don’t understand”; they are individuals struggling with grief, financial pressure, loneliness, and uncertainty. Their humanity gives the show emotional depth across generations and provides substantial, layered roles for women that are still relatively rare in contemporary musicals.

The teenage characters are equally authentic. They are awkward, impulsive, sarcastic, vulnerable, and occasionally cruel in the way real teenagers can be. They swear, make bad decisions, hide their pain, and desperately seek approval. Rather than sanitizing adolescence, the show presents it honestly. That realism is part of why audiences connect so strongly with it. Many people see pieces of their younger selves in these characters, the isolation, the social anxiety, the fear of saying the wrong thing, or the feeling of standing just outside everyone else’s life looking in.

Awkward, Real, and Impossible Not to Love

Some criticism of the musical focuses on Evan’s moral failures, but that discomfort is part of the point. *Dear Evan Hansen* is not asking audiences to approve of everything Evan does. It asks them to understand why someone lonely and emotionally fragile might make terrible choices in pursuit of connection. In many ways, it functions as an antihero story: one that explores how fear and longing can distort judgment without stripping a person of their humanity.

That complexity is what allows the musical to linger after the performance ends. It encourages reflection rather than simple resolution. Audiences often leave thinking about what they would have done differently, whether they have ever acted from insecurity or desperation, and how many people around them might be quietly struggling beneath the surface.

When theater reaches that level of emotional resonance, it becomes more than entertainment. It becomes recognition.

If you are drawn to character-driven stories, emotionally powerful music, and theater that explores contemporary life with honesty and compassion, *Dear Evan Hansen* is worth seeing not because it offers easy answers, but because it asks difficult questions about loneliness, forgiveness, identity, and what it truly means to feel found.

Details

Dates: June 10 – August 2, 2026

Location: The Phoenix Theatre Company, Dr. Stacie J. and Richard J Stephenson Theatre

Tickets: phoenixtheatre.com | (602) 254-2151

Audio Description and American Sign Language interpretation are available for this production. Performance dates and details can be found at phoenixtheatre.com.