

Plugged in, yet all alone: All About Theatre connects with ‘Dear Evan Hansen’



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**Quick Take**

All About Theatre takes on the emotionally complicated “Dear Evan Hansen” with strong vocals and a spectacular technical design that brings its story of loneliness, belonging and our digitally connected lives vividly to the stage.

We have never had more ways to connect with one another.

We text. We post. We scroll. We share the intimate details of our lives with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people we may barely know.

And yet, surrounded by all that

connection, it is still possible to feel

completely alone.

If you go

Who: All About Theatre**What:** “Dear Evan Hansen”**When:** Through Aug. 29**Where:** Colligan Theater at the Tannery Arts Center, 1010 River St., Santa Cruz**Tickets:** [Click here](#)

That contradiction sits at the heart of “Dear Evan Hansen,” the musical about a socially awkward teenager who desperately wants to belong.

The Tony Award-winning show by Steven Levenson, with a score by Benji Pasek and Justin Paul, explores loneliness, grief, family and the sometimes dangerous distance between the lives we actually live and the ones we present to the world.

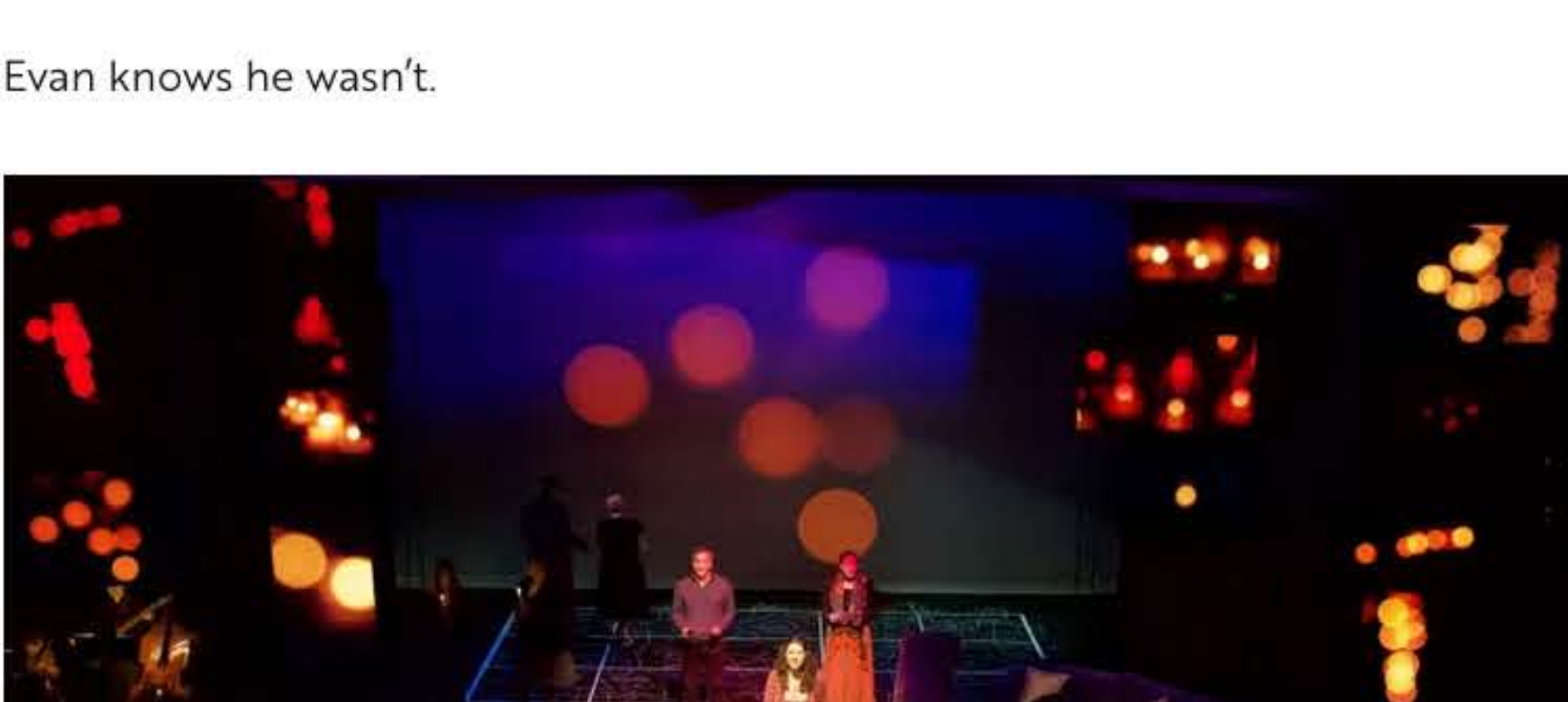
All About Theatre’s adult production, now playing at the Colligan Theater in Santa Cruz, takes on this emotionally complicated story with strong vocals,

some terrific performances and a technical design that steals the show.

The story begins with a misunderstanding. Evan, an isolated high school senior, writes letters to himself as part of a therapy exercise. When troubled classmate Connor Murphy dies by suicide with one of those letters in his possession,

Connor’s parents mistakenly believe Evan was their son’s best friend.

Evan knows he wasn’t.



Molly Donahue as Zoe with Shannon Lyons and David Roberts as her parents in “Dear Evan Hansen” playing at the Colligan Theater. Credit: Contributed by AAT

But for a kid who has spent most of his life feeling invisible, suddenly being wanted and needed is difficult to give up. A small lie becomes an invented

friendship and eventually something much larger as social media carries Evan’s

story far beyond his control.

That moral messiness is what makes “Dear Evan Hansen” so compelling. Evan

does something deeply wrong for reasons we can understand. His loneliness

doesn’t excuse his deception, but it does make us understand how he got

there.

At the performance reviewed, Zaide Rihani takes on the demanding role of

Evan, capturing the awkwardness of a teenager who never seems entirely

comfortable in his own skin. His lovely, soft singing voice carries a vulnerability

that suits a young man who seems to spend much of his life trying not to take

up too much space.

That vulnerability comes through beautifully in “Waving Through a Window,”

Evan’s aching expression of what it feels like to watch life happening around

him without knowing how to become part of it. Rihani doesn’t push Evan’s

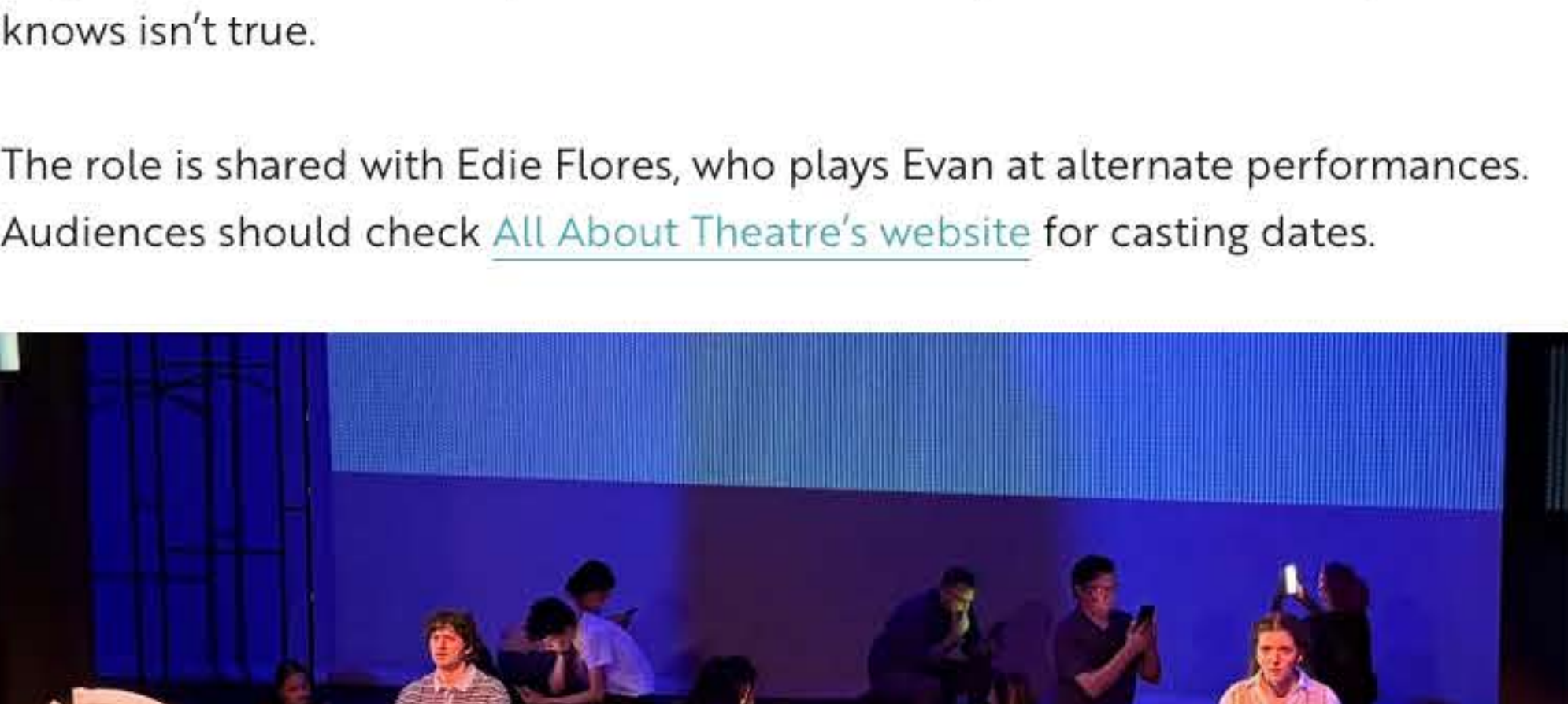
discomfort for effect. A tentative quality to both his singing and acting makes it

easy to see how this lonely kid lets Connor’s family believe something he

knows isn’t true.

The role is shared with Edie Flores, who plays Evan at alternate performances.

Audiences should check [All About Theatre’s website](#) for casting dates.



Zaide Rihani as Evan (alternate cast) with Sophie Henrard (right) as Alana in “Dear Evan Hansen,” playing through Aug. 29 at the Colligan Theater. Credit: Contributed by AAT

Palmer Morrison brings plenty of anger and abrasiveness to Connor, quickly

establishing the volatility that has alienated him from his family and

classmates. Connor’s death comes early, but he remains part of the story as

Evan invents an increasingly idealized version of a boy he barely knew.

That invention draws Evan into the Murphy family, including Connor’s sister Zoe,

played by Molly Donahue. Donahue has striking vocals as a young woman

wrestling with complicated grief. Connor made her life difficult, and his death

doesn’t magically erase everything that happened while he was alive.

That conflict gives “Requiem” much of its power. Shannon Lyons and David

Roberts, as Connor’s parents, join Donahue in beautiful vocal harmonies as the

family struggles with very different feelings about the boy they have lost. Joined

by the company, their voices soar as the screens behind them fill with flickering

candles. It’s a beautiful moment, both musically and visually.

Dramatically, however, Lyons and Roberts are less convincing. Their acting

remains too much on the surface. Their grief rarely reaches us, weakening

scenes that should pack a much greater emotional punch.

As Evan becomes increasingly entangled with the Murphys, his own mother is

being pushed farther away. Lauren Chouinard brings a strong voice and warmth

to Heidi, a single mother juggling work, school and raising a son she loves

deeply without realizing just how isolated he has become. Chouinard’s finest

moment comes late in the second act with “So Big/So Small.” As Heidi finally

reaches for the son she hasn’t realized was slipping away from her, Chouinard

lets the song build without overselling it. By the end, everything else falls away.

It’s simply a mother telling her child she isn’t going anywhere.

Sophie Henrard’s ambitious Alana and Vinny Fortunato’s wisecracking Jared

shine in more than a few scenes, providing much-needed humor as Evan’s

increasingly complicated story threatens to overwhelm him. Both know how to

land a line, and the production perks up whenever they’re onstage.

But the real showstopper is the technology.

Video designer Peter Chester, working with technical directors Russell Smith

and Tom Pepper, takes the idea of being “plugged in” to another level. Fourteen

video screens flank the stage, complemented by large-scale projections across

the upstage wall. Text messages appear, social-media posts multiply and

locations materialize around the actors.

It is marvelous to behold on a Santa Cruz stage. More importantly, it isn’t

technology for technology’s sake. It helps tell the story.

The stage floor, painted with circuit-board patterns and geometric shapes,

extends that digital landscape beneath the actors’ feet, while ensemble

members frequently appear with their faces illuminated by glowing phones. As

Evan’s lie grows, messages multiply and screens fill until the boy who once

couldn’t get anyone to notice him is suddenly surrounded by voices.

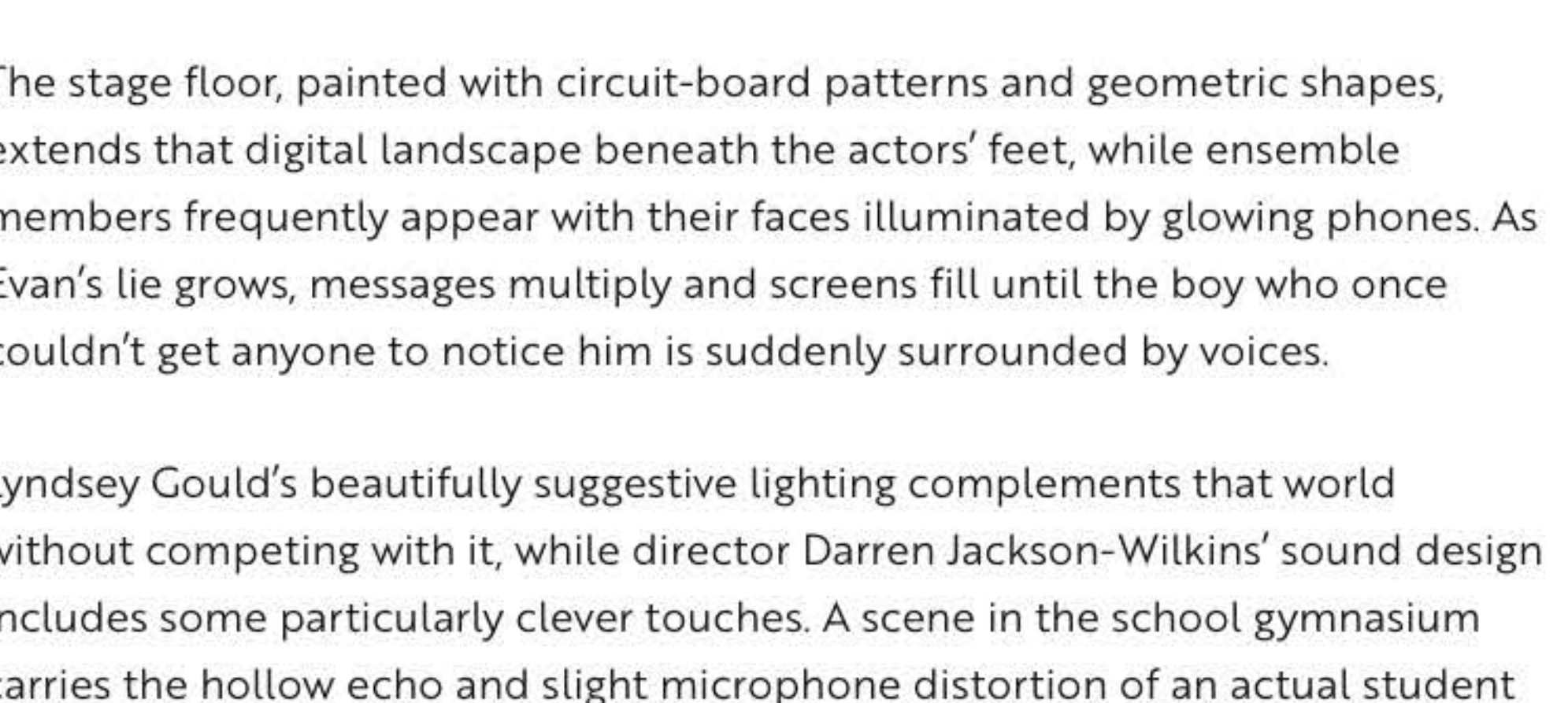
Lyndsey Gould’s beautifully suggestive lighting complements that world

without competing with it, while director Darren Jackson-Wilkins’ sound design

includes some particularly clever touches. A scene in the school gymnasium

carries the hollow echo and slight microphone distortion of an actual student

assembly. It’s a small detail, but an effective one.



Edie Flores as Evan (alternate cast) with ensemble in All About Theatre’s “Dear Evan Hansen” playing at the Colligan Theater at the Tannery Arts Center. Credit: Contributed by AAT

Music director Mazera Cox-Goulter conducts an excellent six-piece band from

the keyboards. The musicians are tight throughout, giving Pasek and Paul’s

contemporary score the drive and sensitivity it needs.

The production falters in its physical staging.

Jackson-Wilkins clearly has a vision for the show, but greater attention to the

actors’ physicality would strengthen it considerably. Too often, particularly

during musical numbers, the leads stand almost motionless with their arms at

their sides, seemingly unsure what to do with their bodies. By the second act,

one number after another staged with so little movement begins to slow the

momentum.

That criticism comes with important context. All About Theatre has long

provided a place for young developing artists to learn their craft, take chances,

and gain valuable experience. Everyone on this stage is clearly giving it their all

and there is something wonderful about watching performers stretch

themselves with material this demanding. But developing artists also need

room to grow, and greater attention to physical storytelling would make this

already ambitious production considerably stronger.

Perhaps the production’s most lasting image is also its simplest: a stage filled

with people staring into illuminated phones, an entire world glowing in the

palms of their hands.

And standing among them is a boy who wants just one person to truly see him.