

## Theater

**Passing Strange**

black rock 'n' roll on Broadway

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By Maureen Mahon

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For years, the singer/songwriter/guitarist known as Stew has led the band [The Negro Problem](#) and won accolades for his cleverly subversive lyrics and melodic arrangements. Now, he's using the wit and attitude honed on the alternative rock circuit to expand the possibilities of the musical and the vision of blackness on Broadway. The new show *Passing Strange*, the fruit of his creative labor, is a smart, funny, and thoughtfully rendered portrait of a black artist as a young man on a sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll fueled quest for his artistic voice. Along the way he learns about himself and the power of love.



But how does a rock 'n' roller end up on Broadway? "That's the question I keep asking myself everyday," Stew said when we spoke. "Basically by staying open and flexible. My collaborator, Heidi [Rodewald] and myself, we never wanted to get to Broadway or ever tried to get to Broadway. When opportunities arose, we just stayed open and curious." Stew and Rodewald were invited to perform their cabaret show at New York's Public Theater and worked with the Berkeley Repertory Theater and the Sundance Institute to develop the piece. After last year's critically acclaimed run at the Public, the show is moving to Broadway.

With its small and excellent ensemble cast, minimalist staging, and subdued costumes, *Passing Strange* offers more rock 'n' roll grit than Broadway glitz. "We like to describe it as a concert out of which a play emerges," Stew explained. "We're performing as close to what we do in a club as we can." The show depicts the journey of Youth (Daniel Breaker), Stew's young alter ego, who leaves a comfortable life in South Central Los Angeles to seek his artistic voice in Europe. With his rock band at his side, Stew narrates the show, plays guitar, sings, converses with the audience, and looks on--sometimes with approval, sometimes with despair--as Youth makes his choices.

The show's celebration of the bohemian path is also a critique of the predictable middle-class lifestyle. "There are certain kinds of accepted behaviors you're supposed to adopt if you are a black kid from this world," Stew observed. Depending on the situation, Youth resists these expectations or exploits stereotypes of black identity, sometimes finding himself in the strange position of passing for black. At its core, though, *Passing Strange* is a meditation on love, told in part through the relationship between Youth and Mother (Eisa Davis). "I think sometimes we as men still do that thing where we're trying to grow up and we think we have to put distance between ourselves and our mothers when actually that's an illusion," Stew told me. "And I think that's why we sometimes have regret later on, because we realize we should have kept that connection strong."

Stew and Rodewald composed a vibrant and wide-ranging soundscape for *Passing Strange*, bringing together a gospel number, a punk rock anthem, Jimi

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Hendrixesque guitar freak-outs, and tuneful pop. As author of the show's book and lyrics, Stew reveals his gift for bitingly astute observations: "It's weird that morning you wake up and realize your entire adult life is based on the decisions of a 17-year-old. A stoned 17 year old," the on-stage Stew muses.

"I still don't think Passing Strange is a Broadway show—in the worst sense of that word." Stew said. With its irreverent humor, ear-catching music, and thought-provoking ideas, Passing Strange offers an exhilarating night out at the theater and an inspiring example of what a Broadway show—in the best sense of that word—can be.

Passing Strange is currently in previews at The Belasco Theater (111 West 44th Street in Manhattan) and opens on February 28. For tickets: Telecharge.com, or 212-239-6200

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