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Florrie Bagel, left, Jennifer Irons, Omoro Omoighe and Rachel Brennan in the musical "Nobody's Perfect" at the Kennedy Center Family Theater. (By Carol Pratt -- Kennedy Center)

## **Preadolescent Angst, With Harmony**

### **'Nobody's Perfect' Delights With Comic Numbers and an Excellent Young Cast**

**By Nelson Pressley**

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Turning 10 can be tough for a girl, especially when you're being snubbed by the "perfect" new kid in class. Alexis, who elaborately sings that she's "99.99999 percent" great, doesn't seem to have the time of day for Megan, the popular deaf girl who's planning a "perfect purple party."

What's Miss Perfection's problem?

The indomitable Megan is slow to find out, but quick to fix things, in "Nobody's Perfect," the largely delightful new musical at the Kennedy Center's Family Theater. Alexis doesn't seem able to deal with Megan's deafness, although it's hardly an issue for anyone else -- including the audience, which is treated to two modest screens of supertitles and continuous American Sign Language from the excellent young cast.

This kid-friendly, hour-long adaptation of the children's book by Marlee Matlin and Doug Cooney (presented with VSA Arts) doesn't sugarcoat how snippy kids can be. Megan, brought to feisty life by Tami Lee Santimyer, is appealing but hot-tempered. (In fact, Megan's many flaws are listed as her friends sing sincerely about how great she is.) And Alexis is extremely curt with her brother. The performance is not without its conniption fits.

But in case the title leaves any doubt, this bright 'n' lively show is all about turning schoolroom spats and family squabbles into (a) snarky pre-adolescent comedy and (b) lessons in patience. The message hardly feels like medicine, thanks in part to a Motowny score by Deborah Wicks La Puma that frequently sounds like "Little Shop of Horrors."

Director Coy Middlebrook had a hand in the successful Deaf West Theatre production of the musical "Big River," so he's well-schooled in the technique of having one of the girls voice Megan's songs off to the side, while Santimyer holds center stage delivering the number in ASL. The sign language is often as compelling as the choreography, although the musical staging by Middlebrook and Alexandria Wailes is also pretty nimble.

The songs themselves are not only catchy but also infectiously performed by the young women, whether soloing or neatly harmonizing in doo-wop style. Jennifer Irons amusingly handles faux operatic flourishes as the self-satisfied Alexis, and Florrie Bagel, Rachel Brennan and Omoro Omoighe all have moments in which to shine. (Honorable mention to Kip Pierson, who plays a teacher, two brothers and a furry pet.)

Parents may or may not wince at the obligatory rap number, cute though it is (it's about an escaped hamster, which includes the lyric "Where that dirty little rodent be?"). But the kids giggle, which is a nice thing to be able to do while absorbing the show's insights.

Nobody's Perfect, based on the children's book by Marlee Matlin and Doug Cooney, adapted for the stage by Cooney, music by Deborah Wicks La Puma. Directed by Coy Middlebrook. ASL translation by Alexandria Wailes. Musical director, Chris Youstra; set design, Michael Phillipi; costumes, Diana Khoury; lights, Beverly Emmons; sound design, Matt Rowe. Through Nov. 3 at the Kennedy Center Family Theater. Call 202-467-4600, TTY 202-416-8524, or visit <http://www.kennedy-center.org>.