

Math, madness and the machine

by W. Fred Crow

Article Launched: 08/13/2008 02:50:15 PM PDT

There is a fine line between genius and insanity, or so it's been said. Genius is that view of the world where the hard can be easy, the difficult likely, and the impossible becomes probable. And getting there may require just a touch of madness. This might apply more so in the field of theoretical mathematics where the pressure and passion to prove the unprovable drives genius to the lip of lunacy.

David Auburn's award-winning play "Proof" offers us a special view into a world of math and romance where the border between brilliance and psychosis blur. "Proof" is a play being staged as part of the Summer Series at Santa Clara Players. The play offers a cerebral journey of intellect and relationship, intelligence and passion, of touching humanity and emotional risk.

Essentially staged as a one-scene set, the play comes to the audience. We're facing the back of an old Chicago home with a weather abused sitting porch. All the action evolves on that small, intimate platform. Director Ana-Catrina Buchser lets the story form and morph before us, first about mathematician Robert's mental breakdown, then about romance. A turn back toward math, and then it's all about personal trust. Buscher lets the intelligence of Auburn's writing come to fore.

The curtain opens on a conversation between Robert (Jeff Swan) and daughter Catherine (Lorie Goulart). It's midnight and she has just turned 25, a time to celebrate. However, something seems amiss during the exchange. We discover

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Robert has been dead for a week and is Catherine's current illusion, possibly a delusion. Catherine has just concluded a five-year struggle of caring for her father. Robert was a brilliant mathematician who suffered a mental collapse the "machinery" failed. She sacrificed her university career for his care. Now he's gone, she's angry, frustrated and questions what she should do with her life now.

Enter Hal (Stephan Sherwood), former student of Robert, and now a university professor who teaches math. Robert wrote obsessively for years collecting his thoughts, ideas, and mathematics in a crate load of notebooks. Catherine believes there is nothing there but gibberish. Hal hopes to glean something wonderful from all that writing. After all, Robert set the math world on its ear twice by the time he was 25. Surely there might be something of greatness hidden among the trash. While Hal is interested in exploring Robert's math, he's also smitten with Catherine and wants a relationship to develop.

Enter big sister Claire (Kelly Battcher) who is a take charge kind of gal. She's there to collect her sister and bundle her off to New York in order to help her regain her life. She has no interest in her father's work, but sees her gifted sister living solitary, broken and

struggling. She only wants to help.

Central to the story is one notebook containing an important, ground-breaking mathematical proof. It could have been from the intelligent mind of Robert. However, Catherine lays claim to the tome, noting that she also has her father's mind. Claire is caught up in disbelief while Hal wants to believe but denies Catherine's prowess and ability. Therein lay the crux of the issue. Trust.

Goulart brings Catherine's pain carefully to the surface. She lets us feel the angst that must be generated through her self-imposed isolation while living with another's dementia. Sharp and witty one moment, she's damaged and anti-social the next. Goulart creates a character that is likeable, then distant and aloof.

Sherwood offered an interesting collection of wants through the character, Hal. He was gracious and concerned he wanted access to the proof notebook. He was solicitous and caring he wanted Catherine. Sherwood moves between the awkwardness of youth to the finesse of a practicing professor.

Battcher is the big sister, in content, in character, in body language and vocal inflection. Battcher's Claire simply knows what's best and doesn't mind telling everyone she's right. She's strong and imposing. When she struggles with the morning-after headache we get to see her vulnerable side.

Swan, as Robert, was quite engaging. We see Robert in a series of flashbacks and illusions where Swan is able to assemble

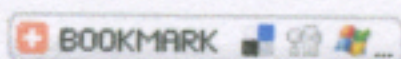
the broken mind of the genius and recreate him on stage. When lucid, Swan lets us feel Robert's joy for life. When lost in his madness, we feel his obsession.

"Proof" was well cast, each member of the ensemble playing nicely off the others. The show is centered by the script and by the words, the dialogue, and the relationships. It has us hoping Catherine can move forward and out from under the shadow of her Robert.

"Proof" is playing a short two-week run at the Santa Clara Players through Aug. 17. The theater is located at the Triton Museum, 1900 Don Ave., Santa Clara. Call 248-7993 for ticket information.

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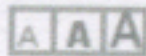
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