Proof: Mirth, Mystery, Madness and Math
By Sophie Braccini

To those of us who are not geniuses, the flirtatious dance between mental instability and brilliance is a far frontier. Still, even for the reasonable and down to earth amongst us, there is a fascination about the extreme regions an exceptional mind can reach. The Town Hall Theater Company's (THT) last play of the season, Proof, is about that dance; the vulnerability of those who are engaged in it, its dangers and its appeal. It is a powerful play that bears some of the appeal of Ron Howard's movie "A Beautiful Mind," with a central female character who will, we hope, survive her exploration of extreme mathematics.

Proof is about a young woman who took care of her mathematician-father for several years prior to his death, which came after a long bout with mental illness. Written by David Auburn in 2001, it received the Joseph Kesselring Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, the Drama Desk Award, and the Tony Award for Best Play of 2001.

Many themes run through the play - Whether mental illness, as well as talent, can be inherited; various misconceptions about mathematicians being a young man's profession (with an emphasis on the word "man"); that there is something that predisposes mathematicians to mental instability; that all creative work is done in the early period of one's life.

It's not a small endeavor for any theater to take on this play. In Lafayette, it was proposed by Artistic Director Clive Worsley to Berkeley Rep Director MaryBeth Cavanaugh. She agreed on two conditions; she wanted to work with Lisa Anne Porter as a co-director and she wanted Worsley himself in the play.

"I was a bit afraid to say yes," says Worsley, "First I thought it would be hard to play someone older than me, but the real challenge was inside: the role requires a level of honesty and vulnerability that's a bit nerve wrecking." Cavanaugh, who knows Worsley well, thought he had the talent to pull off the role.

The casting is just right. Worsley as Robert, the older math genius, moves with great realism between normalcy, overexcitement, and the poignant face of dementia. Siobhan Doherty, as his daughter Catherine, is beautiful, vulnerable, difficult, fragile and very touching. She wins the heart of the audience, which is kept on edge as her fate is decided.

Alexandra Creighton is perfect in her depiction of the other daughter, Claire, the "normal" one. She represents all of us, with her two dimensional vision of life, her practical and pragmatic views, her good intentions and common sense. Harold Pierce is Hal, the old professor's student who is attracted to Catherine, but who has a hard time believing in her. He adds his young, positive energy to a situation that could get bogged down.

The duo directing the play achieves harmony. Cavanaugh is the visual mind of the pair. She choreographed the ensemble and worked with the sound designer to develop a fluid, musical and elegant way to present the play. Porter, an actor by training, concentrated on the text and the actors. The professional result is a testimony to their cooperation. "This is our first co-direction, but we've worked together as parts of other teams before," said Cavanaugh, "we knew we had similar esthetics." Porter adds, "It is hard to be in charge and have an eye on everything; here it was so much fun to just concentrate on the text work of the actors."

In the first act of the play the rhythm weakens a bit toward the middle. But it finishes with a bang, and the second act does not let up. Proof runs from June 5 to July 3. It is rated PG-13 (for strong language) and is about two hours long. Showtimes: 8:00 p.m. Thursday, Friday, Saturday, 2:00 p.m. June 13 and 20, 7 p.m. June 27. Contact the Town Hall Theatre Box Office at (925) 283-1557, or purchase online at www.TownHallTheatre.com.

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