

Math Magicians

River Cities' Reader – July 16, 2006 - by Mike Schulz

Generally, when attending a play at Geneseo's Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, it doesn't matter where you sit; the venue's shows are presented theatre-in-the-round-style, and more often than not, Richmond Hill's directors stage their works accordingly, giving audiences a fine view of the action from anywhere in the house.

For its production of David Auburn's *Proof*, however, the theatre's playing area has been transformed into a three-quarter-thrust stage (*Proof's* front-porch setting designed against the Barn's fourth wall), and at the Friday-night performance I attended, the "best seats in the house," directly facing the set, were already filled by the time I arrived; instead, I took a seat on the stage-left side of the theatre. But for future *Proof* audiences - and I hope that includes many, many of you - who may find themselves in a similar situation, I'm here to tell you not to sweat the view in the least.

If I hadn't been seated on that side of the theatre, I wouldn't have seen Jessica Nicol's exquisite, sad smile, mixed with a hint of pride, when mathematician Hal informed Nicol's Catherine of the genius proof he recently discovered. I would have been deprived of Stacie Kintigh's delicate anguish as Catherine's sister, Claire, when she implores the math whiz to leave her emotionally shaky sibling alone. I wouldn't have fully registered the comic tenderness of David Kintigh's Hal, as Catherine hints at the extent of her intellect, and Hal finds himself in unfamiliar emotional terrain. And I would have missed the uncertainty in Craig Michaels' eyes as his math professor, Robert, desperately tries to convince daughter Catherine of his sanity.

These were all moments that, in director Jennifer Kingry's staging of *Proof*, anyone sitting direct-center would have missed, and they underline my absolute favorite thing about attending shows at Richmond Hill.

At the Barn, your close proximity to the actors - coupled with the audience, as a whole, effectively *surrounding* the actors - makes it impossible for a phony performance to sneak through without your noticing; the actors, literally, have nowhere to hide. And when one of their shows is acted with the sincerity and commitment of Richmond Hill's current presentation, the effect is exhilarating. There *can't* be a bad seat in the house at *Proof*, because the production's four actors are so fully in character, and give their roles such a breadth of physical and vocal detail, that you'll catch thrillingly honest, telling moments no matter which actor you focus on, and no matter where your seat is located. The only shame is that it's impossible to catch them *all*.

The role of Catherine is one of the meatiest in contemporary theatre, yet Jessica Nicol never makes a point of this fact; she gives a great performance by never calling attention to her greatness. Everything about Nicol's focused, lived-in portrayal feels true - Catherine's depression, her anger, her sardonic humor - and the actress is smart enough to subtly change her rhythms depending on which character she's speaking to. With Robert, she's empathetic yet imploring, gently attempting to coax him away from madness; with Hal, her witty defenses rise and, just as suddenly, fall; with Claire, years of sisterly resentments seem to burst forth in sarcasm and impatience. Catherine has been written extraordinarily well, and Nicol fully honors Auburn's accomplishment.

Nicol's co-stars couldn't make for a better match. Stacie Kintigh's Claire, gently trying not to rock Catherine's boat, makes the character's apologetic shallowness incredibly touching, and her line readings are slyly funny; Claire, with Catherine, is only *acting* the ditz. Kintigh's real-life husband, David, has a voice that cracks like an adolescent's (at times, his deliveries sound uncannily like David Schwimmer's) and gives a completely winning, open-hearted performance, and as Robert, Craig Michaels is enjoyably inscrutable, and plays opposite Nicol with deft sweetness.

Under Kingry's inspired direction, Richmond Hill's *Proof* quartet creates stage magic in an already magical piece of drama, no matter which seat you choose; audience members could probably situate themselves *behind* the set and still feel the effect of this ensemble's talents.

Nits aside, 'Proof' positive

Quad City Times – July 13, 2006 - by Ruby Nancy

Sometimes it is the little things that distract from a show — even to the point of being jarring enough to become a “big thing” that keeps a show from working altogether. For the nitpicker, it doesn't take much to qualify as a little thing.

Take, for instance, the shoulder straps of the dress worn by Jessica Nicol, who stars in “Proof,” the Pulitzer Prize-winning drama by David Auburn that opened last weekend at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre.

Slightly askew, as though donned in a hurry (as was the case, no doubt), the dress straps had a barely perceptible odd angle that jarred just a teensy bit with the deliberate precision of the character, Catherine, who wore the dress.

Don't misunderstand me, though, the dress is a really great one that looks simply awesome on Nicol, and this talented actor gives a subtly perfect performance as a character who isn't quite comfortable in it. I may have been the only person at Saturday's performance who even noticed the uneven straps, but I mention them for a reason.

It's the *only* thing about the entire performance that was not quite right.

While on a lesser performer — or in a lesser play, or even a lesser production of a great play — I might have spent the entire scene wondering if the strap would ever be adjusted into the exact position, in this case I was so engrossed in the scene that I forgot all about it. (And those who know me well can best appreciate just how much of a compliment that is.)

Nicol and this “Proof” are both totally excellent. In what is her finest work to date (at least among what I've seen), this actor gives an intense, emotion-laden performance that will stay with you for a long time. Catherine, the show's central character, is a bright young woman who completed less than a year of her undergraduate studies because she has been caring for her ill father.

There is so much going on with Catherine: fear that she may have inherited her father's mental illness along with his gift for advanced mathematics, resentment of her older sister's freedom to pursue a career, and her fundamental isolation.

Nicol's work, which is a marvel of reserve, lets us see so much of Catherine's emotional interior through her eyes and facial expressions. While the writing here is certainly good, her performance hinges in part on what she expresses in her silences — and very few performers can pull off something that deeply felt and that consistent.

Director Jenifer Kingry has something of a reputation for helming superbly written projects very well, and her work here is no exception. Many lines in “Proof” could be (and usually are) played for laughs, but Kingry's version is straightforward drama.

Before seeing it, I might have thought developing the show this way would leave it lacking, but in the hands of a brilliant director, it works perfectly. It is serious without being the least dreary, and the result is a stunningly moving work.

Kingry also designed a great set for “Proof.” It's a basic layout for many theaters, but in this case, it is a break from the traditional Richmond Hill “theater in the round” presentation — but more importantly, it simply works. Most of the space is used for a large back porch, adjacent to the façade of a house, and the scenes are staged on the porch.

Many authentic details make up the setting here, and their near-reality allows them to serve as background rather than competing for attention.

Nicol's performance, which is top of the line, has plenty of good company. Craig Michaels gives an evocative, occasionally irate performance as Robert, the unbalanced-yet-loving father whose career as a mathematics professor and proof-writing legend was cut short by illness. Stacie Kintigh is perfectly contemptible as Claire, the job-pushing currency analyst who tries to organize Catherine's life against her will. (As an aside, imagine the kind of family where the

topnotch currency analyst is the dumb sister ...) While the character is easy to dislike, Kintigh does present Claire in a multi-layered way that allows for the idea that she at least means well.

As Hal, one of Robert's students, David Kintigh is also excellent. His Hal retains some of the geekiness you would expect, based on the script, but he manages to do so without resorting to overt stereotyping to do so. His Hal is a lanky, quiet guy who has lived long enough to have some major regrets, and David Kintigh lets us see a few of them as we go along.

If you haven't heard of this show or are afraid it might be about math, don't let that stop you from seeing this absolutely wonderful show. It's simply too good to miss.

`Proof' is an intense production

Dispatch / Argus – July 11, 2006 - by Julie Jensen

The fine line between genius and madness spans the nine intense scenes of 'Proof,' the current production of the Richmond Hill Players.

David Auburn's two-act play has received the Pulitzer Prize in Drama, the Drama Desk Award and the Tony Award for Best Play in 2001, and it's anything but a tired businessman's special.

Jessica Nicol turns in an outstanding performance as Catherine, the daughter and caretaker of Robert, a brilliant mathematician who 'goes nuts' in Chicago.

Even though her dad tells her, 'just because I went bughouse doesn't mean that you will,' she has her concerns.

She goes to Northwestern, leaving him on his own, but has to come home and deal with him when he sits on the back porch in December, coatless and scribbling furiously.

Ms. Nicol listens so expressively, showing sympathy, anger, and affection as the other characters speak. Her face and her body speak volumes in return.

Craig Michaels is Robert, her father, and he is warmly paternal at times, lost in his work and his madness at others. On her 25th birthday he buys her what she calls 'The worst champagne I ever tasted,' but that doesn't keep her from drinking it, and because he forgot the glasses, she swigs it straight from the bottle.

David Kintigh is Hal, a former student of Robert's, who is going through '103 notebooks full of crap' Robert produced in his last years. He's a math nerd, uncertain about how to pursue a personal relationship but well-meaning.

The relationship between him and Catherine will be stormy, but the attraction is there.

Stacie Kintigh plays Claire, Catherine's sister who breezes in from New York for their father's funeral and wants to take Catherine back with her. In the first scenes in which she appears she seems much more likeable than this character usually is, but she works up to the controlling, know-it-all older sister in due course.

She does, in fact, arrange to sell the Chicago house, and Catherine is afraid she means to put her in a mental hospital in New York City.

Catherine gives Hal the key to a drawer in her father's desk, and he finds a notebook containing a proof 'too hip' to have been written by Robert. Catherine says she did it, but Hal says the handwriting looks like her father's.

The play ends with Hal and Catherine having an intense mathematical discussion of her proof.

The scenes in the play jump four years into the past twice, and director Jennifer Kingry has connected the dots extremely well.

Jessica Nicol has a love affair with the lights

Dispatch / Argus – July 13, 2006 - by Claudia Loucks

One walk across the stage, under the lights, and Jessica Nicol was hooked on theater.

Ms. Nicol, now of Moline, became involved in drama in her freshman year at J.D. Darnall High School in Geneseo when she was cast as a map-seller in *"The Great All American Musical Disaster."* The rush of delivering one line in that show began a rich theater career that's led to her current role in the Richmond Hill Players' *"Proof."*

"I really love *"Proof,"*" she said. "I read the script three or four years ago and thought it was well-written and smart. It is a drama, but it also has plenty of endearing and humorous moments.

"I hesitate to say too much about the show or my character, Catherine, as I may ruin it for potential audience members."

Born and raised in Atkinson, Ms. Nicol graduated from Geneseo High School in 1995, where she was very involved in speech as well as theater. She graduated from Truman State University, Kirksville, Mo., in December 1999.

She made her debut with Richmond Hill during high school, working backstage on *"Crimes of the Heart"* and going onstage to play Margot in 1995's *"The Diary of Anne Frank."* Her favorite Richmond Hill roles have been Chrissy in *"Dancing at Lughnasa"* and Bertha in *"Bertha the Beautiful Typewriter Girl."*

She has been in Playcrafters presentations at The Barn Theater in Moline, as Constanze in *"Amadeus"* (2003) and last summer as Tansy in *"The Nerd."* She also has been involved with the murder-mystery group *It's a Mystery* since 2003, and was hired this year as a player at *ComedySportz* in Rock Island.

In addition to her work with theater, she also co-directs group interpretation at Geneseo High School.

"Susan Simosky and I have been working hard with this program since 2001," she said. "We have gone to state competition three of the last five years and have been fortunate to work with some amazing young talent."

But that might be as far as she wants to go in directing. "I am undecided as to whether I want to direct a full-length show," she said. "I have a lot of respect for any director, and I know how much work goes into a production. I am just not sure that I feel ready for that kind of commitment.

"I'm not sure why I enjoy doing theater as much as I do," Ms. Nicol said. "I don't think that is something I could explain. I love to be on stage, and I love being involved in the excitement and thrill of a live production.

"I might as well just say 'I love it!' and leave it as simple as that."