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'Proof' examines the line between genius and insanity

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**BODY:**

Everyone walks around with a little craziness inside them. Some people are wasting money on therapy; other people who think they don't need it are the ones who must have it the most.

"Proof," winner of three Tonys in 2001, is a play examining this balance of intelligence and insanity. It kicks off the second season of the University of Illinois at Springfield's newly renewed theater department when it opens Friday. "It's an examination of genius, sort of a modern-day 'Amadeus,' if you will," says director Eric Thibodeaux-Thompson of David Auburn's play. "It's about what the byproduct of a life would be for one individual so unusually blessed with a particular aptitude.

"It's sort of like that classic line about Einstein. He couldn't remember his phone number, but he gave us formulas that will forever change our lives."

Set in Chicago, "Proof" unfolds in flashbacks, present day and inside the mind of Catherine (Carly Shank). She is the daughter of Robert (Ron Seney), a genius math professor who had suffered for four years from a mental illness before recently dying.

Catherine abandoned her own college pursuits to tend to Robert and now takes care of his home, while sister Claire (Anna Dow) is flying in for the funeral. Claire and Catherine's relationship is not a strong one, based on an argument over Catherine's care, or lack thereof, for Robert.

Former student Hal (Ryan Casey) is curious to rummage through the more than 100 notebooks of theorems Robert left behind, which Catherine begrudgingly allows him to do. Their discovery of a potentially revolutionary mathematical proof in one of Robert's notebooks escalates the already tense situation.

"At first glance, it's a drama, but it's also a mystery - whether the proof is accurate and who actually wrote it," Thibodeaux-Thompson says. "And it's not just about the well and unwell people. There's a romance and some funny moments in the play."

Seney was drawn to the opportunity to portray Robert at three distinct times in his life - when he's dead, when he's functioning and when he loses his faculties.

"Getting at that fine line between genius and insanity is interesting," Seney says. "And when you first see me, I am a re-creation in (Catherine's) mind. I really can only say what she's allowing me to say. So in that scene, I'm really not touching her or touching any of the props."

Shank saw the play in its Broadway run and admires the Tony-winning performance Mary-Louise Parker gave in it.

"She is so much herself in everything she does, but I'm not trying to be her," says Shank, who works for Sangamon Auditorium. "But it was such a great female role. The trick is to play her as someone with (a little bit of craziness) instead of just being crazy. And I was sort of panicked because I thought no one will produce it in Springfield until I get to be too old. I think the university has an obligation to perform plays like this and I'm glad to see that happening."

Thibodeaux-Thompson says response to last year's "It's Only A Play" and "A Lie of the Mind" was good and an encouragement for him to allow UIS to fill a niche for more dramatic plays.

"I think we've really added a complement to Springfield, along with the fine work done at The Muni and Springfield Theatre Centre," he says. "Eventually, we'll take our turn at a musical, but we wanted to open this year with something very new."

Production is under way on a film version of "Proof," directed by "Shakespeare in Love's" John Madden and starring Anthony Hopkins and Gwyneth Paltrow. Despite the story's structural intricacies, he thinks it will translate well to the screen.

"And it would be a bonus if it compelled people to see the source play, which I believe it will for a lot of people," he says. "It gets at the notion that all of us have a quirk, and I think it's interesting what passes for acceptable and unacceptable behavior in our society."

"Proof"

At 8 p.m. Friday, Saturday and Nov. 21 and 22, and at 2 p.m. Sunday and Nov. 23, Studio Theatre, Public Affairs Building at the University of Illinois at Springfield. Tickets are \$10 for the general public, \$6 for UIS faculty and staff and \$4 for UIS students. For tickets, call 206-6738.

**GRAPHIC:** 1. Carly Shank, who plays Catherine in "Proof," sits during the opening scene while Ron Seney, who plays Robert, begins his dialogue at a dress rehearsal in the Studio Theatre at the University of Illinois at Springfield.; 2. Anna Dow, who plays

Claire, listens to some last-minute advice from director Eric Thibodeaux-Thompson during a dress rehearsal for "Proof."

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