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Here's *Proof* why this play is so popular

By Phil Funkenbusch

Springfield gets one last chance to see the Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning play *Proof* before it hits the big screen in a version starring Gwyneth Paltrow. The local production, directed by Eric Thibodeaux-Thompson, not only demonstrates why the play's won such widespread acclaim, but it also boasts a remarkable performance by Carly Shank. Anybody who needs a reminder of the depth of local acting talent should see her on stage.

Very few dramas in the American theater these days gain the kind of praise and recognition that *Proof* has in the past three years. The reason is simple: Playwright David Auburn has created characters that engage and fascinate audiences throughout the course of the play. And though part of the story revolves around a mystery of sorts (and audiences love a good mystery), it really is about human beings and how they reach out and connect to each other. It's also a family drama. There's a bit of a love story as well. And it's also about math!

Shank plays Catherine, a young woman in Chicago who is living under the shadow of her father (Ron Seney), a genius mathematician who eventually became mentally unbalanced. Auburn moves his plot back-and-forth in time as he uncovers the layers of a family's story. Both Shank and Seney make these characters real and it's a pleasure to watch them. The play is really Catherine's and Shank accepts the responsibility beautifully. She is in command of the stage whenever she's there and is basically onstage throughout the entire evening. And Seney's scenes, though few, are memorable, especially one in Act II in which the character suffers a meltdown.

Anna Dow, though less experienced, leaves her mark in the role of the sister. She is far too young for the role she is playing here, but is an actress with talent. Ryan Casey plays a mathematician, a star student of Catherine's father. Like Dow, Casey is too young and inexperienced, but completely immerses himself in the role and delivers.

Thibodeaux-Thompson deserves credit for bringing together community and college theater, creating something more than a university production. Here, college students like Dow and Casey are given the opportunity to work with true professional-caliber actors like Shank and Seney. And this is a real positive addition to local theater.

Proof continues at Studio Theatre at the University of Illinois at Springfield at 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Nov. 21-22, and 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 23. Call 217-206-6738 for tickets.

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