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## Doing the Math

by Amy Krivohlavek

Proof reviewed November 4, 2007

**Math** has never been the sexiest subject, but in David Auburn's superb play *Proof*, the study of numbers anchors a fascinating, almost voyeuristic, look at a splintering family. The play nabbed both the Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize in 2001, and the Astoria Performing Arts Center has produced an earnest, if not thrilling, revival of this razor-sharp drama.



Richard Vernon and Catherine Yeager  
Photo Credit: Taryn Kennedy

Each potent scene takes place on the back porch of a typical family home in Chicago, and we meet Catherine after midnight on her twenty-fifth birthday, sulky and slugging champagne straight from the bottle as she talks with her father, Robert, a famous and unrivaled mathematician and professor. But what appears to be a typical domestic scene quickly twists when Robert reminds her that his funeral is the following day. The play, like Catherine, hovers alluringly on the cusp of this madness. Is Catherine simply drunk and hallucinating? Or does she resemble her father—who eventually deteriorated into dementia—in more ways than in her prodigious mathematic ability?

Besides her father, who appears both as a ghost and in flashbacks, Catherine is joined by her tightly wound older sister Claire, who flies in from New York for the funeral, and Hal, one of her father's graduate students. Claire is eager to put things in order, sell the house, and drag Catherine back to New York, while Hal is itching to get his hands on the stacks of notebooks in Robert's office. Catherine assures him there's nothing there, but he's looking for a diamond in the rough—one last stroke of genius from Robert's faltering faculties. When Hal plucks a potentially groundbreaking proof from the pile, the question of exactly what it is—and who wrote it—throws the trio into further distress.

Auburn deftly positions his characters as if they were numbers in a complex equation, aligning and shifting and repelling them to create explosive conflict. "She's not my friend, she's my sister," says Catherine of the fussy Claire, and the sisters' tumultuous relationship is particularly riveting. It's the electrifying push and pull of two diametrically opposed (yet related) personalities: Catherine, who gave up going to college to care for their father, is bitter about her sacrifices and yet shattered by his death, while Claire, jealous of the intellectual aptitude shared by her sister and father, overcompensates by trying to take care of her intractable sister.

In this solemn production, intense musical passages underscore and drive the transitions between the scenes. These original compositions, by Jeffrey Campos, place the rumbling chords of a piano and the moaning of a cello into furious counterpoint—the instruments rub up against each other in both harmonious and dissonant patterns, much like the relationships that percolate in each scene.

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Richard Vernon and Catherine Yeager  
Photo Credit: Taryn Kennedy

Michael P. Kramer contributes yet another fantastic set to APAC (his designs for *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* and *A New Brain* were similarly sumptuous), this time creating a cozy yet damaged domestic zone, complete with picture windows and peeling paint. Lighting designer Erik J. Michael adds even more depth to the set, from the

warm golden lamplight within the house to the eerie shadows from the trees. Like the bars of a prison cell, these dark slim slivers seem to trap Catherine in her anguished world.

Director Tom Wojtunik also seems to get ensnared—in the rapid-fire delivery of Auburn's dialogue. He has elicited composed performances from his actors, but in many scenes—particularly the opening father-daughter conversation—the actors trade lines with a breathlessness that effectively locks down emotion and steamrolls over much of the humor. There's snap and vigor in these pithy exchanges, but they often blot out the dimensionality that makes these characters so interesting.

For example, Catherine's tough-as-nails exterior is shaded by a very real vulnerability—namely, her fear that she will end up like her father. She resists her sister's help, but she's eventually seduced by the goofy Hal, who manages to cut through her spiky shell. As played by Catherine Yeager, however, this Catherine is all blunt edges. Infusing her performance with noxious sarcasm, Yeager turns Catherine into something of a cartoon, rolling her eyes out at the audience after nearly every line. Her most poignant moments come in a flashback in which she tenderly cares for her father—here, she finds the varied layers that would give Catherine much-needed complexity in the other scenes.

Catia Ojeda turns in a poised and refreshingly witty performance as Claire, and Richard Vernon makes a believable, if slightly too easygoing, Robert. (One gets the feeling that the nutty professor would be a bit more idiosyncratic.) Richard D. Busser fares best as the industrious Hal; he brings a winning, loose-limbed charm to the nerdy student who is determined to be cool, at least cool enough to impress his advisor's brilliant daughter.

At its best, *Proof* peers in on family strife with the irresistible intimacy and immediacy of eavesdropping; when these actors stop "performing" and allow Auburn's writing to take fire, their charged conversations transform their lives, and the math, into compelling—even sexy—equations.



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Meredith E. Magoun  
**Assistant Director:**  
Taryn Kennedy  
**Original Music:** Jeffrey Campos  
**Casting:** Rosen & Wojcik Casting, Inc.  
**Graphic Design:**  
Jennifer Madara  
**Postcard Photography:**  
Michael Garten  
**Cellist:** Allison Seidner  
**Fight Choreography:**  
Ryan Kasprzak

#### Cast

Richard Vernon as Robert  
Catherine Yeager as  
Catherine  
Catia Ojeda as Claire  
Richard D. Busser as Hal

#### Crew

**Stage Manager:**  
Christine D. Goutmann  
**Assistant Stage  
Manager:** Krysta Piccoli  
**Master Electrician:** Joe  
Cantalupo