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### A *CurtainUp* Berkshire Review

#### *Animals Out of Paper*

By [Elyse Sommer](#)

*"Pain isn't a blessing unless you're crazy. It's not something you sit around being thankful for.— Ilana"*

*"I don't know. It might be. It's not pleasant . . . but it's real."*—

Andy, the nerdy teacher who's been literally counting his blessings since he was and was advised to do so by the little slip of paper found in a fortune cookie.



Elizabeth Rich (Ilana), Chad Hoepfner (Andy)  
(Photo credit: Rick Teller)

With so many small new plays running very briefly in small theaters here, there and everywhere around town, a few always disappear from New York before I or someone at *CurtainUp* can see them. In 2008, Ravjiv Joseph's *Animals out of Paper* was a case in point. Having missed its brief Off-Broadway run but heard good things about it, I was delighted to finally catch up with it at the Chester Theater

as the first in its season dedicated to romantic comedies — make that atypical love stories that depart from this genre's typical components.

Like , [Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo](#) play which was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and created enough of a buzz for a 2011 Broadway production at the Booth Theatre, *Animals*



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2011 Broadway production starring Robin Williams, *Animals Out of Paper*, is very much the work of a playwright with a distinctive voice and an intriguingly fresh approach to dramatically explore life. In this three-hander Joseph brings us into the world of origami as a highly sophisticated art form rather than as a fun paper craft. He cleverly uses paper folding as a new metaphor through which to examine the meaning of life, likening the folding process to the way life's joys and hurts fold into each other.

Given the Chester Theatre's love story theme for this summer, this season opener may be seen as a variation of the love triangle, with its three characters coming together through their relationship to origami. The chief origamist is Ilana (Elizabeth Rich in a performance of strong emotional depth and variety) . She's a master of what you'll discover is a merger of high art and sophisticated mathematics. As the opening reveals, the only paper that this successful artist seems to be handling are cartons of take-out Chinese food. Besides not working on one of her commissions, she looks as if she hasn't gotten out of her robe and slippers in days. In short, she's retreated from life.

Ilana is roused from her depressed state (turns out she's got plenty to be depressed about — a failed marriage as well as a disappeared, probably lost, 3-legged dog!) by the insistent buzzing of her doorbell. The uninvited caller is origami enthusiast, member of an origami organization and a high school calculus teacher Andy (Chad Hoepfner, bringing a wonderful quality of caring, childlike optimism and vulnerability to the role). As he exclaims over the intercom he is delivering an award from the association whose members have been concerned about the lack of response to their communications.

After some awkwardly amusing, pause filled exchanges over the intercom —resistance from her, persistence from him— Andy is admitted to the cluttered studio. The messy food containers and her obvious depression notwithstanding, he's clearly thrilled to be in the studio of a woman whose art he admires and whose origami book he's read over and over again. But this visit is more than a chance to give vent to his crush on Ilana. He has a gifted student, Suresh who's lost interest in everything since his mother was killed in an auto accident and thinks with Ilana as a tutor, his already



demonstrated facility as an origamist might bring him around to his old, ambitious and high energy self.

So there you have two parts of the love triangle in place. Something about Andy penetrates Ilana's depressed lethargy. For starters, there's his nerdy charm and persistence. Most of all, she is drawn to his own very special involvement with paper via a little notebook in which he's literally listed his blessings since age twelve when his fortune cookie contained the advice to "count your blessings.. He's now passed the 7000 mark with his recorded blessings which include having heard Ilana at a lecture and read and re-read her origami book entitled *Folding What I Lost*.

By the end of his uninvited appearance at Ilana's studio, it's obvious that they'll meet again, if only for him to pick up the blessings notebook he accidentally leaves behind. Her resistance to the idea of tutoring the troubled student is a given the minute Andy shows her some of Surech's little origami animals.

So there we are, the pieces of the triangle are in place. The scenes that follow show we watch Ilana's life become enfolded with that of both Andy and the student he's determined to help. The relationship with Andy is in the best romantic comedy tradition. It stumbles but also grows through her reading the notebook he left behind. Her involvement Suresh (Vandit Bhatt who does a fine job of moving through this super bright and equally troubled teen's constantly shifting emotional journey) also starts unpromisingly as she doesn't relate to his hip-hop way of speaking. As it turns out he makes her see the relationship between rapping and folding.

While the play continues to live up to its description as a comedy throughout the first act's three scenes, the Ilana-Surech and Ilana-Andy dynamic deepens it's evident that these three people feel joy, pain and creative satisfaction in ways as varied as the folds that go into something like the Tyrannosaurus Rex that Suresh creates or the heart that Ilana has been commissioned to construct for a medical group.

Joseph's dialogue and the delicate shading of comedy with

deeper, darker feelings keeps the romance between Ilana and Andy from sliding into overly familiar territory. The origami background adds a catchy and symbolically apt twist. The playwright has dug deep enough into his characters, to make it all fresh rather than forced and manipulative. However, after four years and several other productions, the playwright still hasn't managed to find a way to have all his fine folding see his play through to a really satisfying ending.

Once Ilana is back into active, fully alive mode and accepts an invitation to take part in a prestigious origami conference in Japan (the country where the art of origami originates), the plot veers towards a mix of docu-melodrama that somehow ends in a fizzle and goes counter to the more uniquely delicate humor spiced story preceding it. Andy and Ilana's romance that's so nicely cemented by their being a bit like proud, nurturing parents to a needy genius child becomes less nique and fres in the confrontation upon Ilana and Suresh's return.

Fortunately, the tears in the fold have not kept director May Adrales and her design team from creating a production that manages to move the action from Ilana's Studio, to a restaurant and a hotel room in Nagasaki with a very simple unit set by Vicki R. Davis. That set's most distinctive prop, consists of several sheer fabric panels which, abetted by Lara Dubin' lighting, allow the audience to see Ilana in the apartment, and a shadowy Andy in the lobby.

If seeing this play has sparked your interest in how the ancient art form of origami intersects with mathematics, you might keep your eye out for a rerun of the PBS documentary *Between the Folds*. One of the experts interviewed in that film, Mathematics Professor Thomas Hull of Western New England University has served as a consultant for this production and a number of his own origami sculptures are on display in the CTC lobby.

And if *Animals Out of Paper* has made you curious about seeing more of Rajiv Joseph's work, you're in luck. Barrington Stage is mounting the East Coast premiere of *The North Pool* from July 26th to August 11th at its St. Germain stage on Linden Street in Pittsfield.. This one is a psychological thriller about a high school vice principal and a

transfer student from the Middle East. Tensions rise and secrets are unveiled in this psychological drama.

Animals out of Paper by Rajiv Joseph,  
Directed by May Adrales  
Cast: Elizabeth Rich (Ilana), Chad Hoepfner (Andy), Vandit Bhatt (Suresh)  
Set Design: Vicki R. Davis  
Lighting Design: Lara Dubin  
Costume Design: Charles Schoonmaker  
Sound Design: Tom Shread  
Stage Manager: Lori Amondson  
Running Time: Approx 2 hours, including one intermission  
Chester Theater Company 15 Middlefield Road Chester, MA  
From July 5 and plays through July 15, 2012  
Reviewed by Elyse Sommer on July 5th

#### REVIEW FEEDBACK

Highlight one of the responses below and click "copy" or "CTRL+C"

- I agree with the review of Animals Out of Paper
- I disagree with the review of Animals Out of Paper
- The review made me eager to see Animals Out of Paper

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