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Animals Out of Paper by Rajiv Joseph. Directed by May Adrales.



"You fold it once...it remembers something."

Human beings respond to impulses; sometimes they respond inward and sometimes outward. Paper when it's folded, valley fold or mountain fold, responds the same way humans do, it remembers at all cost which way it has been turned. And sometimes, as it is said in Rajiv Joseph's play "Animals Out of Paper" currently playing at the Chester Theatre Company's historic country playhouse in Chester, MA, "folds leave scars."

Ilana has been scarred. Her husband has left her taking much of what she has cared about for years. Her dog, three-legged and scared, has run off and left her. She has deserted her home and is living in her basement, windowless studio surrounded by vestiges of her work in Origami, the art of paper-folding. She is unable to fold, no - even to touch, the art paper she has worked with for so long. Her hermit state even prevents her from receiving mail or male visitors.



Elizabeth Rich & Chad Hoepfner; photo: provided

Andy has pursued her to this odd lair and manages to get inside Ilana's private space. His appearance there stymies her and yet it changes everything as emotions, admiration and a scholarly need for her help with a prodigy, come into play. Like a fancy Origami sculpture, she is folded into the social mixture and is turned from a frumpy Turkish towel into a sleek fashion plate in black and white, from a single paper "jewel" into a double stellate dodecahedron.

This may be the first play to use the Asian art-form as its major metaphor. It is done here with an ease and a



Hoepfner and an Origami Hawk; photo: provided

gracious gesture toward American indifference to the art of turning a flat, square piece of paper into something exquisite and rare. Playwright Rajiv Joseph has taken this and the equally odd metaphor of counting one's blessings and created a play that is rich in language, in visuals and in romance of the strangely old-fashioned kind. Though he leaves us with an unhappy ending he manages to derive a sense of hope out of the despair that opens the play. There is hope for Ilana. There is hope for Andy. There is Suresh who needs no hope at eighteen, he only needs to be twenty.

The three-character play has been cast with an eye toward talent. Chad Hoepfner plays Andy with the sort of attack that sings out the nickname "Nerd" while disguising a true romantic at his core. Andy opened a fortune cookie one day and found the message "Count Your Blessings" and he not only counts them, he catalogues them in a notebook. This childlike, romantic gesture gets him into hot water when his book falls into the hands of the woman he is falling in love with as he is trying not to let her know it. Hoepfner plays the distaff sides of the situation he is in with perfect timing, perfect inflections. He brings this character to latent life, a nearby state to real life. He does it with small gestures, an arched neck, a sense of rising to his toes that is never real at all. It is a very delicate performance that brings Andy to perfect life and Hoepfner is careful, until the end to maintain that delicate balance. But when he loses what he wants, his losses lose him in a marvelous moment of the most sincere anger on local stages today.

Vandit Bhatt plays Suresh, the high school student who raps his lovesong to Ilana while on a trip to Japan to compete in an Origami competition. He may be making up a song to milk but he is milking his situation and doing it well. Bhatt takes his character on a long, slow ride to adulthood and plays with the emotional content of a seventeen year old very well. It is a nicely modulated performance.



Vandit Bhatt and Rich; photo: provided

Over-the-top and loving it is Ilana as played by Elizabeth Rich. Whether playing the angry, frustrated and emotionally challenged woman or becoming the love-affected older woman with an irresistible urge to embrace a much younger man, Rich plays with sincerity and honesty and, with the support of a script that gives her all of this to play, she never loses our sympathy or our empathy. It is a neat trick to pull off both of those emotional reactions at once but she manages it.

In under two hours director May Adrales takes us through the world inhabited by these three miscreants, three villains without an evil thought or mean bone in their bodies, yet three unable to be honest with one another even at the best of moments. Without knowing the script it is hard to gauge where the author and director converge and where either dominates, but the use of the stage space, the development of each character visually and certainly the emotional state of each at the end of the play must be credited to Adrales eye, ear and mind at work. She has done a fine job of bringing this intriguing play to the stage.

Vicki R. Davis provides a useful stage set that allows itself to be what is needed. Charles Schoonmaker provides reasonable costumes and the lighting designed by Lara Dubin aids in establishing both place and time of day while also giving us the mood and ambience for each scene.

Chester has started its season with a winner. Nobody actually folds anything during the course of the play and that's a pity, but there always has to be something to complain about and in this case it's of much less consequence. A good play has been had by all!

◇07/06/12◇

15. For information and tickets, call the box office at 518-354-7771.

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