

'Animals Out of Paper': Seeking order in lives out of sync

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CHESTER -- Origami artist Ilana Andrews' life is going off the rails.

The messiness of her studio is beyond making a statement about the way things need to be in order for her to work, it is emblematic of her full-blown midlife. She has retreated behind the walls of her small apartment. She shuffles around the place in her bathrobe and pajamas. Her hair is unkempt. Clothing, books, newspapers, piles of folding paper, newspapers, empty take out Chinese food containers are scattered everywhere. Suspended from the ceiling is a massive origami hawk.

As we meet Ilana in Rajiv Joseph's thoughtful, if also overreaching, "Animals Out of Paper" -- which is receiving an intelligent, feeling, well-acted production at Chester Theatre Company -- she is in the midst of a divorce and while she's been hired to work as a special consultant for a project involving a new heart surgery procedure, Ilana hasn't worked at her origami, the art at which she is a recognized master, for far too long a time.

On the rainy day on which "Animals Out of Paper" begins, opportunity rings Ilana's doorbell in the form of a high school calculus teacher, Andy Froling (Chad Hoepfner). Froling also is treasurer of an organization called American Origami. Ostensibly, he has shown up at her door to get her to renew her membership. What he really wants is to persuade her to mentor a hugely brilliant student named Suresh (Vandit Bhatt), a natural origami talent who is at a difficult juncture in his own life.

Ilana (played convincingly, for the most part, by Elizabeth Rich) reluctantly agrees. Suresh is not easy. He's challenging, strong-willed, acting out. It's his defense, it turns out, against the challenges of his own life. Even as Ilana and Andy form a relationship of their own, something undefinable is at play between Ilana and Suresh, who gain as much from each other as they are able to give. When Ilana takes Suresh with her to an important origami conference in Nagasaki, Japan, their relationship takes an unexpected turn in ways that have consequences for Ilana, for Suresh, and for Andy, whose feelings of betrayal at the deepest level overwhelm him in a stunning, explosive moment that is, as Hoepfner plays it, absolutely gut-wrenching.

Symbolism abounds in "Animals Out of Paper." Joseph too often has difficulty keeping his dramaturgy and his symbolism in balance. But, much to their credit, director May Andrales and her cast, especially Hoepfner and Bhatt, deliver a compassionate, truthfully acted production that is clear, lucid and focused even when Joseph's writing is not.