

Cultural Daily

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A Landlocked Constellations

Sylvie · Wednesday, June 21st, 2017

British playwright Nick Payne's 2012 play *Constellations* took up residence at The Geffen Playhouse last week, following a trail of rapturous reviews earned in England and New York.

The London *Daily Telegraph's* [Charles Spencer](#) wrote that "Nick Payne's drama lasts just over an hour but packs in more than most shows manage in three times that length. It is playful, intelligent and bursting with ideas..." The *Independent's* Paul Taylor gushed that "one would be hard put to begin to do justice to the dazzling way it creates its own rules, while at the same time being wise enough not to jettison the old rule book either..." Oh, and *Constellations* also won the *Evening Standard's* 2012 Best Play award.

Encomiums expanded when *Constellations* crossed the pond and *The New York Times's* Ben Brantley said this "fugue-like production, takes that most elemental of dramatic setups — boy meets girl — and spins it into a seeming infinitude of might-have-been alternatives... through the application of the principles of string theory, relativity and quantum mechanics, although don't ask me to explain precisely how."

I won't ask. Brantley claims, however, to have had no difficulty following the romance "between Roland... a beekeeper, and Marianne... a Cambridge University academic specializing in 'theoretical early universe cosmology.'"

If all this is true, I must be living in one of those parallel universes that come up again and again in the oft-repeated stream of non-sequitur conversations in *Constellations* and that, rather than inspiring awe in me, inspired irritation.

No two productions are alike, of course, and two-character plays depend heavily on the chemistry generated by the two actors impersonating the characters. But I doubt that the London or New York productions differed enough from the one in Westwood to overcome the limitations of the script. The actors at The Geffen may not exude exhilarating charm, but they are certainly not duds. In case you haven't figured it out by now, my problem lies not with them, but entirely with the play.



Allen Leech and Ginnifer Goodwin in *Constellations* at The Geffen.

Let's get this out of the way: Ginnifer Goodwin and Allen Leech are eminently capable performers. Goodwin's Marianne has the *gamine* appeal of an Audrey Hepburn, with kookier

looks; Leech offers a winning Hugh Grant-ish style of befuddlement and underlying sweetness to his nerdy Roland. You may know Goodwin from HBO's *Big Love*. And you may know Leech from *Downton Abbey*. These are not beginners. What they need is better material.

The director is the talented Giovanna Sardelli, yet her staging of this two-hander is ho-hum at best, in a production that does not approach the level of her 2015 staging of Rajiv Joseph's *Guards at the Taj* at this theatre — or her staging of *Archduke*, Joseph's latest play, which recently ended a good run at the Mark Taper Forum.

Constellations, for which the Geffen audaciously demands top dollar, is bargain-basement barebones in every sense. Designer Takeshi Kata is credited for an empty stage, with two or three pieces of furniture and a cycloramic backdrop that doesn't even deliver on the opportunity the play's title implies: an exciting starry sky at play's end. (Lap Chi Chu provided the basic lighting and Denitsa Bliznakova the even more basic costumes.)

The reality is that Goodwin and Leech are stuck in what amounts to an 80-minute acting class exercise that's in love with its own cleverness. Armed with a pair of nicely tuned, cute/coy performances lost in nonlinear time, they ride a slender romantic arc as flimsy as tracing paper.

The gimmick is intentional stammers, interrupted sentences (as much fun as interrupted sex) and repetition offered as a way to illustrate the difficulty of communicating feelings. Ionesco and Beckett were there first and did it better. The confusion is exacerbated by a lot of jargon about the "Quantum Multiverse" of "every choice, every decision you've ever and never made" that "exists in an unimaginably vast ensemble of parallel universes."

Yes, there sometimes is room on stage for stammering conversations, incomplete sentences and even nonsense, but this does not rise to that level of coherent incoherence. One scene is played entirely in sign language. There must be a reason why, but it is a massively arrogant imposition on an audience, because the question persists: does it get us, emotionally speaking, where we need to go? Does it open up startling new avenues? Do these aborted sentences and pseudo-erudite verbal exchanges enlighten us? Or do they just obfuscate?

Despite a few touching moments near the end, this nonplay is all smoke and mirrors. The few discernable events in this on-again, off-again romance — such as other partners getting in the way, sketchy infidelities, the pain of devastating illness as we move along — do not provide the poetic justification or philosophical sustenance even for a scant 80 minutes.

The only thing that sparkles against such odds is these actors' dedication. But even they can't make *Constellations* out of LED bulbs.

Top image: Ginnifer Goodwin & Allen Leech in Constellations at The Geffen Playhouse.

Photos by Chris Whitaker.

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WHAT: *Constellations*

WHERE: Gil Cates Theatre, Geffen Playhouse, 10886 Le Conte Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

WHEN: Tuesday-Friday, 8pm; Saturday, 3 & 8pm; Sunday, 2 & 7pm. Ends July 23.

HOW: Tickets \$32-\$90 (subject to change), available in person at the theatre box office, online at www.geffenplayhouse.org, or by phone at 310.208.5454. Students: \$25 with valid ID. Student rush: \$10. See www.geffenplayhouse.org/rush for more information.

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