Cultural Daily

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Heisenberg, or Love is Where You Grasp It

Sylvie · Wednesday, July 12th, 2017

If you're planning to see *Heisenberg*, the play at the Mark Taper Forum, don't bother to research physicist Werner Heisenberg in any depth. All you need to know is that Heisenberg, a key pioneer of quantum mechanics, was the author of the "Uncertainty Principle," the theory whereby "you can measure a subatomic particle's velocity or its position, but not both at the same time."

I'm not precisely sure how it relates to the play except for variations on that key word *uncertainty*. Any sentient human being can tell you that *uncertainty* is also the principle of everyday living. And I surmise that is what playwright Simon Stephens was after when he used this cheeky *double entendre* as the tantalizing title for the unconventional love story now unfolding on The Taper stage.

It's a simple story yet so unexpected. It likes to mislead and keep you guessing. Who are these two people whose paths cross in a railway waiting room and are so isolated in their lonely space on a bare platform that stretches across The Taper's thrust stage, turning it into a theatre-in-the-oval?

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Denis Arndt in *Heisenberg* at The Mark Taper.

One is Alex Priest (Denis Arndt), a 75-year-old butcher (of all things), who couldn't blend more into beige if he tried — and the other is Georgie Burns (May-Louise Parker), a 42-year-old American firecracker, propelled by loneliness or chutzpah, whose every move is unpredictable, including the one we don't get to see: the kiss she plants on the back of the neck of an astonished Alex, the stranger she's never met. And that's before the lights go up.

This kind of beginning to a play could be a groan-inducer, especially in a two-hander where there's no chance of anyone else stepping in to alter the dynamic. Georgie, however, is disrupter enough (sometimes disrupter-too-much) and surprise follows surprise in the mostly one-sided conversations that ensue.

Mary-Louise Parker in *Heisenberg* at The Mark Taper.

Since she does most of the talking, it ensures that those conversations are rarely dull. Georgie is a vibrantly weird, mostly benevolent liar, whose imagination never sits still and whose energy is at

once suspect and irresistible.

If Alex-the-bland is the quiet sort (she tracks him down to his butcher shop), he neither shies away from this intrusion, nor feels the need to become more aggressive. She's aggressive enough for the two of them. You'll notice also that although Alex resists, he does not flee. Arndt's stoic-silent performance has its own brand of perplexed charm that does not reveal itself right away. It only gradually accepts Georgie's pesky invitations to allow life to take over. The core of tenderness in their chemistry creeps up on them — and on you. And its *crescendo* finale leaves us wondering in new ways about the nature of reality (as opposed to truth) and the value of opening long-sealed doors to the fresh air of grasping life in the moment. To say more would spoil the fun.

Denis Arndt and Mary-Louise Parker in *Heisenberg* at The Taper.

Mark Brokaw, who directed the play with these actors at New York's Manhattan Theatre Club and on Broadway (where Arndt earned a Tony nomination), has restaged it here with the light and sensitive touch that it requires. Mark Wendland is credited with designing the elongated platform that stretches like the deck of a long boat across the Taper stage and is (somewhat inexplicably) darkly lit by Austin R. Smith. Michael Krass designed the basic street clothes worn by the actors. But the sound design by David Van Tieghem needs help, whether because of the theatre's altered configuration or faulty amplification or acoustical gremlins. It was not easy on opening night to catch some of the exchanges, let alone every word.

AND SPEAKING OF UNCERTAINTY…

Chance played a curious role in a quite astonishing other way when Stephens' 2015 play *Heisenberg* turns out to be a kind of mirror image for Nick Payne's 2012 play *Constellations,* now running across town at The Geffen Playhouse through July 23.

Consider the following: playwrights Payne and Stephens both hail from England, both are graduates of the University of York and both have a history of working with many of the same London theatres. So there can be some certainty that they know each other and each other's work.

And yet *Constellations* and *Heisenberg* appear to be antipodes — two extremes of the same inspiration. Both relate (distantly) to quantum mechanics, employ just two actors, are 80 minutes long and use similar dramaturgical tools — the bare stage, the man and woman, the intuitive choppy language and the uncertainty of time, truth and events.

Where *Constellations,* however, is all over the place and makes a focus of its incoherence, *Heisenberg* delivers a piece that is also offbeat, yet works its way into a disciplined and delicious — if uncertain — love affair.

As far as I can ascertain (some uncertainty there), the juxtaposition of these productions running on parallel tracks at opposite ends of the city is unplanned. As for the comparisons this coincidence throws up… you may draw your own conclusions. Suffice it to say that each offers a markedly different result for an uncommon idea rooted in such an uncannily similar concept: The uncertainty of time, life and events, even when it comes to where, when and how they play.

Top image: Denis Arndt and Mary-Louise Parker in Heisenberg *at The Mark Taper Forum.*

Photos by Craig Schwartz.

WHAT: ***Heisenberg***
WHERE: Mark Taper Forum, 135 No. Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90012.
WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Ends Aug. 6.
HOW: Tickets: $25–$95 (subject to change), available online at CenterTheatreGroup.org, at (213) 628-2772 or in person at the Center Theatre Group box office. Groups: (213) 972-7231. Deaf community: Info & charge at CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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