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Review: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

David Sheward · Wednesday, October 29th, 2014

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time shouldn't work. Its protagonist, Christopher Boone is a difficult young man to like. Incredibly brilliant at math and logic, yet suffering from a form of autism, the 15-year-old cannot comprehend human emotion and hates being touched. He screams and becomes violent whenever anyone does so. He's also arrogant and selfish. Plus, the titular mystery—the canine of the title is killed and the falsely-accused Christopher sets out to find the culprit—is solved at the end of the first act. As if that weren't enough, there are a lot of math problems—which are not exactly the stuff of high drama. And let's not forget the original Mark Haddon novel is all told in the first person from Christopher's skewed perspective.

But just as she did with *War Horse*, director Marianne Elliott makes brilliant use of stage craft to bring a seemingly untranslatable literary work to breathing, vital life in this stunning production from Britain's National Theatre. Playwright Simon Stephens has surmounted the challenge of the source material by having Christopher adapt his journal as a play narrated by his teacher Siobhan while Elliott employs Bunny Christie's vast graph-paper-lined box of a set as if it were a blank sheet for Christopher to work out his emotional and mathematical dilemmas. With the invaluable aide of Paule Constable's lighting, Finn Ross's video design, and the soundscape created by Ian Dickinson for Autograph and Adrian Sutton's original music, we journey into the complex world of a suburb seething with subtext and then to the urban madhouse known as London. And it's all from Christopher's point of view, so that his trip on the train and subway become a harrowing bombardment of sensations. The ingenious movement by Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett for Frantic Assembly perfectly augment the intricate staging.



Ian Barford and Alex Sharp in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Photo credit: Joan Marcus

All this technical wizardry might overshadow the performances, but a powerful American cast proves equal to the efforts of the helmer and her design team. As Christopher, recent Juilliard graduate Alex Sharp does a magnificent job of carrying the show on his boyish shoulders. He masterfully conveys the teenager's incisive intelligence, child-like neediness, and raging incomprehension at the bad behavior displayed by the grown-ups. We actually get to like this impossible adolescent. Ian Barford finds the deep love at the center of Christopher's undemonstrative father and Enid Graham makes for a sympathetic mother despite the character's questionable actions. Francesca Faridany as Siobhan provides an anchor for the action and Mercedes Herrero adds spice, doubling as a nasty neighbor and a vinegary headmistress.

As for the math problems, Elliott uses all the means at her disposal to create a spectacular post-curtain call coda about triangles. If you never thought you'd be cheering about equations, check out this curious and marvelous *Incident*.

Opened Oct. 5 for an open run. Ethel Barrymore Theatre, 243 W. 47th St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri., Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 35 mins. including intermission. \$27-\$129. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

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