

'This Much I Know' at Theater J is an exhilarating head trip

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By **John Stoltenberg** - February 8, 2024

This much I know about Jonathan Spector's enthralling and exhilarating *This Much I Know* now at Theater J: It's a head trip and a half.

A two-acter with three actors in multiple roles, *This Much I Know* happens as much in one's mind as on stage. The show is framed as a lecture, set in what looks to be an academic lecture hall and delivered by a professor of psychology named Lukesh, warmly well played by Firdous Bamji. He wins us over right away with a wry twist on the turn-off-your-phone pitch and goes on to show us he could tape a top-rated TedTalk.

The affable professor — inviting us to rethink how we think we think and then recall how our memory remembers — makes many a beguiling point about the curious way we humans ratiocinate and make belief. Interwoven are seemingly disparate storylines that may or may not cohere or connect even as our brains seek to divine meaning in them — an experience of art not unlike life.

Firdous Bamji as Lukesh, Dani Stoller as Natalya, and Ethan J. Miller as Harold in 'This Much I Know.' Photo by Ryan Maxwell Photography.

We soon learn that the lecture hall set is not what it seems. Scenic designer Misha Kachman has devised sliding green slate screens and worn wood platforms that roll in and out with assorted set pieces so as to segue from space to space and viewpoint to viewpoint just as Spector's supple script does.

The ever-magnetic Dani Stoller appears as Natalya, who is married to Lukesh but has left him, not because of anything he did but because of something *she* did and feels responsible for, even though she was not — an emotional incident dramatizing how the mind can be incapable of reflecting on culpability. “The mind is not built to recognize the category of things we have done but are in no way responsible for,” explains Lukesh.

Natalya goes on an ancestral quest that takes her to Russia, where, in the way that Spector folds incongruous realities one into another, Stoller morphs into Svetlana Alliluyeva, Joseph Stalin's daughter — all the while wearing the same sleek satin blouse and pants that costume designer Danielle Preston chose for her. Stoller's swift switching in physicality and dialect between Natalya and Svetlana is transfixing. And lighting designer Colin K. Bills makes the many scene shifts luminescent.

The real Svetlana did, in fact, defect to the U.S., and here as imagined by Spector she plays a role in one of the play's provocative thematic convergences: Just as Svetlana descends from a father she loved but whose hating was notoriously lethal, Harold, a young man who seeks in Lukesh an academic advisor, is the scion of a father whom he reveres but who is a famed white nationalist. In scenes where Harold is challenged by Lukash (who is, he emphasizes, “not a white person”), Ethan J. Miller gives a riveting performance as a young man wrestling with his father's hate-filled racist ideology, only some of which he disavows while some of which still grounds his white identity — a vivid example of how, as Lukash says, false ideas are “sticky.”

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Firdous Bamji, Dani Stoller, and Ethan J. Miller; Ethan J. Miller; Firdous Bamji, Ethan J. Miller, and Dani Stoller, in 'This Much I Know.' Photos by Ryan Maxwell Photography.

Uncanny animated projections designed by Mona Kasra show a pair of black-and-white portraits of Stalin and Harold's father whose mouths move as Bamji speaks their authoritarian voices into a mic. (Sound designer Sarah O'Halloran amplifies the chilling effect.) The stark parallel between the antisemitism of Svetlana's father and the antisemitism of Harold's father emerges unmistakably, stirring up deep questions about how the mind adopts and adapts to racist values and beliefs.

As Svetlana says of humans' penchant for cognitive illusion, "The less you know the more certain you are."

Haley Finn directs *This Much I Know* with such a sure hand and precise appreciation of the play's puzzle-like structure that a more lucid production of this visionary script (which she selected as Theater J's new artistic director) would be difficult to imagine. Of particular note is the actors' fascinating physicalization of their roles. I first observed how expressively each acted with their hands and fingers — Stoller's embodied rapport with her several scene partners was especially impressive — but it became clear that she was not the only one: the dynamic corporality of all three had been deployed in their bodies as though in intentional counterpoint to the play's interrogation of cerebration and the limits of cogitation.

There are many more storylines in store in the play, more narrative intersections than I have sketched; and while Stollar toggles between two characters, Bamji and Miller depict a dizzying array of more than a dozen, including, at one point, Svetlana's five husbands. By intermission, one may reasonably be wondering how or whether the puzzle pieces will come together.

Late in the second act, Lukesh recounts a true story about gut decision-making that can understatedly be described as mind-blowingly consequential. Yet conceivably by the end, one may still be wondering how to wrap one's head around what one saw, and one may be remembering the play differently from how others received and perceived it. To this point, Lukesh the psychology lecturer provides a breathtaking insight: He likens the brain to "a machine that allows us to project ourselves into possible futures and imagine counterfactual outcomes."

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This Much I Know is a thrilling instance of theater's power to reveal us to ourselves.

Running Time: Approximately two and a half hours including one intermission.

This Much I Know plays through February 25, 2024, presented by **Theater J** at the Aaron & Cecile Goldman Theater in the Edlavitch DC Jewish Community Center, 1529 16th Street NW, Washington, DC. Purchase tickets (\$50–\$70, with member and military discounts available) **online**, by calling the ticket office at 202-777-3210, or by email (theaterj@theaterj.org).

The program for *This Much I Know* is online [here](#).

COVID Safety: Masks are required for Thursday evening and Saturday matinee performances. For more information, visit [Theater J's COVID Safety Guidelines](#).

This Much I Know

by Jonathan Spector

CAST

Lukesh: Firdous Bamji

Natalya: Dani Stoller

Harold: Ethan J. Miller

CREATIVE TEAM

Director: Hayley Finn

Set Design: Misha Kachman

Costume Design: Danielle Preston

Lighting Design: Colin K. Bills

Projection Design: Mona Kasra

Sound Design: Sarah O'Halloran

Props Design: Pamela Weiner

SEE ALSO:

'It's theatrical and fun, like a puzzle': Hayley Finn on 'This Much I Know' at Theater J (interview by Ravelle Brickman, January 24, 2024)

John Stoltenberg

John Stoltenberg is executive editor of DC Theater Arts. He writes both reviews and his **Magic Time!** column, which he named after that magical moment between life and art just before a show begins. In it, he explores how art makes sense of life—and vice versa—as he reflects on meanings that matter in the theater he sees. Decades ago, in college, John began writing, producing, directing, and acting in plays. He continued through grad school—earning an M.F.A. in theater arts from Columbia University School of the Arts—then lucked into a job as writer-in-residence and administrative director with the influential experimental theater company The Open Theatre, whose legendary artistic director was Joseph Chaikin. Meanwhile, his own plays were produced off-off-Broadway, and he won a New York State Arts Council grant to write plays. Then John's life changed course: He turned to writing nonfiction essays, articles, and books and had a distinguished career as a magazine editor. But he kept going to the theater, the art form that for him has always been the most transcendent and transporting and best illuminates the acts and ethics that connect us. He tweets at @JohnStoltenberg. Member, American Theatre Critics Association.