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CULTURE

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BY PETER ROSENSTEIN

This Much I Know

At Theater J now.



Photo by Courtesy of Theater J by Ryan Maxwell photography



Dani Stoller and Firdous Bamji

This Much I Know is a play by Jonathan Spector, superbly directed by Haley Finn, who is the artistic Director of Theater J. The written program suggests the play asks the following questions. “Am I in

charge of my choices? How could anyone think or do that? What is happiness?”

It tells us “In the midst of a lecture, a psychology professor’s marriage fractures, sparking a theatrical study of three characters as they become entangled in a search for self-discovery. With inspiration from the research of Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, the characters search for answers in the science of decision-making. They learn that, in Kahneman’s words, thinking can be “fast or slow,” emotional or deliberate, drive-like and intuitive, or calculated. Part mystery, part love story, part philosophical quest, *This Much I Know* spins our axis of belief and understanding.”



Ethan J. Miller Courtesy of Theater J by Ryan Maxwell photography

I agree with much of that but add that *This Much I Know* leaves you with a lot of thoughts about ‘how much you don’t know,’ and that is a good thing. It takes a few moments when the play begins to realize you, the audience, are the students sitting in the classroom of a

psychology professor, who has his own personal issues, which keep interfering with his teaching.

He challenges you the audience, his students, to think about how you react to various stimuli in your life. What is the thought process you go through, and how automatic is it? He challenges you to think about your own triggers. How you would react to the people in your life, as you watch him react to his wife; who tells him she is leaving him, and one of his students, who tells him he thinks he is a white supremacist because that is what his father is. From there the play goes even farther afield.

Spector makes you think about a lot of things. With his student, it is how you move on from your parents and their beliefs? How do they continue to influence your thoughts? His wife is Russian and is writing her memoir. It gets interesting when during her research, her life intersects with Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter, who came to the United States, and who it turns out was a good friend of her grandmother in Moscow. She tries to find out if Svetlana tried to save her grandmother.

So yes, there is a lot to unpack in this play, but it takes you along for the ride, and you are never bored, and are always thinking. While it may seem these topics don't lend themselves to humor very easily, there is actually plenty of it in the play, and the audience clearly picked up on most of it.

The cast is made up of three people. They each play numerous roles aside from their main ones. They are all really good. There is Lukesh, the professor, played by Firdus Bamji. He plays some other minor characters, and is also the voice of Stalin, and the white Supremacist. Then Natalia, the wife, played by Dani Stoller. She is also Svetlana, and at one point her own grandmother. Both of these actors are wonderful, have very believable accents in their various roles. They totally command the stage when they are on.

But without doubt, the standout in the cast is Ethan J. Miller. He plays Harold, the student, along with a host of other roles throughout the play. Each one with a different accent, and each with a totally different personality. He is a young actor, who everyone will be hearing about; he is that good. He uses every part of his body; face, hands, the way he stands, to develop the characters he plays.

He even shows off his skills with a Russian squat dance. I can't wait to follow his career.

The creative team for this production is great. While at first the set looks fairly simple, it is actually a complicated set made to look that way by the very talented Scenic Designer, Misha Kachman. Then there is Lighting Designer, Colin K. Bills; Costume Designer, Danielle Preston; projection designer, Mona Kasra; and Sound Designer, Sarah O'Halloran. Again, they are all supremely talented, and their work adds immensely to the evening.

This Much I Know will be at Theater J until February 24th. I definitely recommend you get a ticket before it sells out.

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