



# Theatre Review: 'This Much I Know' at Theater J

Posted By: Anne Valentino on: February 07, 2024



(From left to right) Firdous Bamji, Ethan J. Miller, and Dani Stoller. Photo by Ryan Maxwell Photography.

Jonathan Spector's "This Much I Know" is currently having its East Coast premiere at Theater J. It was the winner of the 2023 Theatre Bay Area Will Glickman Award for best new play bending, narrative arc-diverting, and deeply intellectual commentary on history, relationships, and all the things that we think we know, the play, in many ways, puts the utter fragility front and center. The characters orbit a theatrical space of memories recalled and also those memories that have been lost, whether altered by time or somehow replaced by "other

**“ A time-bending, narrative arc-diverting, and deeply intellectual commentary on history, relationships, and all the things that we think we know...Hayley Finn Artistic Director, sits in the director's chair...She quite masterfully succeeds.**

The play opens with psychology professor Lukesh lecturing to the audience. He compels us to question how our mind makes connections, what our eyes actually see or don't see, and matters to the story at hand. While the quasi-confessional lectures help reveal more of Lukesh's personality and thus provide a basis for his impending crisis of conscience, the lecturing is the bigger picture: that of the different modes of thought that are available to the human mind. Inspired by Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Spector dives deep into what triggers the question of how sure we are about the "rightness" of our responses.

Lukesh's wife, Natalya, has been involved in a car accident. While she emerged unscathed, the biker who pulled out in front of her was not so lucky. This trauma and the associated trauma lead Natalya on a trek through Russia with nothing but a text to her husband by way of goodbye—a humorous visual moment that adds some lightness to loss. This seems to be a real play. Through loss and devastation, there is usually some lighthearted moment to be mined. Natalya's grandmother was apparently very close friends with Joseph Stalin's daughter, a character who gets plenty of stage time. There is a carefully orchestrated interweaving of stories, eras, and cultural atmospheres. On the surface, they are distinctly different but, at times, have some uncomfortable similarities, as evinced, for example, by Harold, a student of Lukesh's with white nationalist origins. The visual of Stalin's talking portrait as interchangeable with a White, supremacist father is indeed a strikingly provocative one.

The cast of three slides so easily from one character to the next. As the vulnerable, albeit self-absorbed Natalya and also Svetlana, the at-times confused "daddy's girl," Dani Stoller bring the malleability that works beautifully. Firdous Bamji's Lukesh is a strong lead and a wonderfully surprising character actor as he morphs into a few other roles to include one of Svetlana's father, Ethan J. Miller who plays Harold, as well as a series of quirky Russian characters, proves himself an accent acrobat, veritably flipping from one voice and character into the next. Hayley Finn, Artistic Director, sits in the director's chair for this one. Her task is a difficult one; she must put together a puzzle and yet, not make it seem like a puzzle at all. She quite masterfully succeeds here that makes it all just work.

Misha Kachman's scenic design, in conjunction with Colin K. Bills' lighting, is a revelation. Harkening a game board and featuring a series of slidable panels and floor sections, the set evokes the chaos of memories, imagined moments, and the reality we sometimes refuse to see. Projections (Mona Kasra) and sound design (Sarah O'Halloran) take production values to an impressive level. When all was said and done, I came away from this one with new ideas about how thoughts get compartmentalized and how hard-won, and yet easily lost, confidence can be when it comes to knowing what we know.

Running Time: Two hours and 30 minutes including one 15-minute intermission.

"This Much I Know" runs through February 25, 2024 at Theater J, 1529 16th St NW, Washington, DC 20036. For more information and to purchase tickets, call the Box Office at (202) 771-5000, Monday-Friday, and one hour prior to performances, or go **online**. Masks are required for Thursday evening and Saturday matinee performances.

