

Intimate 'Proof' is a dazzler

■ Stellar performances, direction make Shakespeare's Associates production a winner

By Pat Craig
STAFF WRITER

To those whose mathematical abilities barely reach the subtraction-on-a-calculator level, the notion of higher math rests in the same mysterious tomb as diagramming sentences and remembering the capitals of North and South Dakota.

Yet those of us who have managed, one way or another, to crawl from the primordial ooze of high school realize there is a breathtaking mystery and romance in calculus, and that may be one of the reasons why "Proof" is so engaging.

Of course, it could also be that David Auburn's Pulitzer Prize-winning play is a beautifully told story of romance, family love, competition and the quest for power. Math aside, this is one great piece of theater, extraordinarily created by Livermore's Shakespeare's Associates in the intimate West End Theatre space at Bothwell Arts Center.

It is theater at its most basic — a small space where the seats and stage aren't permanent, and the actors have to

THEATER REVIEW

■ **WHAT:** Shakespeare's Associates production of "Proof," by David Auburn

■ **WHERE:** West End Theatre in Bothwell Arts Center, 2466 Eighth St., Livermore

■ **WHEN:** 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays through April 13

■ **RUNNING TIME:** 2 hours, 15 minutes

■ **HOW MUCH:** \$25

■ **CONTACT:** 800-838-3006, www.shakespearesassociates.org

creep into the playing area by flashlight because there is no back stage to speak of. Seconds after the lights come up, none of that matters. The cast captivates from the start, as Catherine (Hannah Knapp) prepares for the next phase of her life following the death of her father, Robert (William Wolak), and the return of her sister Claire (Alexandra Creighton).

For years, Catherine has been taking care of her father, a world-famous mathematician who has been in failing mental health. She has more or less devoted her life to him, and sister Claire feels she has given up some of her own mental stability in the process. So,

she wants to sell the old family home in Chicago and return to New York, where she will care for Catherine.

Catherine, on the other hand, has different ideas, complicated by recent happenings in her life and the appearance of Hal (Michael Barrett Austin), a former student of her father's on the scene.

The show moves with mathematical precision between flashbacks and the present to tell the story (those with more advanced math skills may even be able to determine a pattern here), and the story becomes increasingly emotional and involving as the characters' lives become ever more complex.

Director Virginia Reed has kept the show's action very much in the moment, and has her actors doing a terrific job of playing their roles in a hugely realistic manner that makes the play feel as much like eavesdropping as watching a performance.

Auburn has been able to create dialogue that works well in a realistic context, but is also extremely clever and eloquent. And the play has what has to be one of the best first-act curtain lines in theater history.

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