

The Columbus Dispatch

Entertainment & Life

Theater review | ‘Curious Incident of the Dog’: Novel’s adaptation becomes vivid drama in Ohio State production

By Margaret Quamme

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The fans who jealously cherish Mark Haddon’s novel “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” might well be suspicious of its transformation into a play. A first person account by an unusual 15-year-old, it depends for its power almost entirely on the voice and way of seeing the world of its narrator.

But the novel is in good hands with Simon Stephens’ creative transformation into a long two-act play, now impeccably produced by the Ohio State University Department of Theatre, which immerses the theatergoer into the vivid and sometimes mystifying experience of Christopher Boone (Connor Graham).

Christopher, more at home in the world of numbers than of people, hates being touched, is unable to lie, and takes everything he hears literally.

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He is living in uneasy peace with his hard-working, dogged, and occasionally volatile father (Sean Ryan Naughton), and only truly comfortable with his teacher Siobhan (Lillian Brown), when he discovers that his neighbor’s dog has been killed.

As he sets out to find the “murderer,” forcing himself to interview neighbors and rebelling against his protective father’s demands that he drop the subject, he finds out more about his own family than he can initially handle.

Graham, who is onstage throughout, is entirely credible as Christopher, shaping the strictly verbal portrait of the book into a physically vivid and precise performance. He ranges from the self-contained boy logically explaining the reasons for his actions to the heartbreaking one overwhelmed by a world of too much noise, sound and raw, inexplicable emotion.

Kevin McClatchy's crisp, unsentimental direction allows the play itself to expand with the same range, with both comic and wrenching scenes permitted to develop their own rhythms. There's a respect for all the characters here: No matter how flawed, and most of them are quite flawed, none of them are villains.

In what is, aside from Graham's central performance, essentially an ensemble piece, the actors move fluidly from one role to another, with a winning emphasis on physical action, sometimes playing individual characters, other times a crowd through which the reluctant Christopher must make his way, and other times inanimate objects, with a fizzy collective energy throughout and a strong sense of where each element is in space.

This allows for some irresistible changing acts, as when, for example, Cheyanne Tutt switches from an irrepressibly enthusiastic school principal to a seductive ATM.

Technically, the various elements of the production mesh seamlessly. A stage floor and background divided into grids allows for both a sense of rigidity and one of varied possibilities, with projections on both heightening the feelings Christopher experiences and often can't directly convey.

What's impressive is that these strong elements don't overpower the more human side of the play. While they let us know what Christopher is feeling in strong bursts of feeling, they're also reined in to allow his physical movements to communicate even more strongly.

Underneath its technical expertise, "Curious Incident" is essentially a coming of age story raised to a higher power, with a mightily struggling hero who loses a sense of innocence and undertakes a dangerous journey. It's to the credit of this vibrantly emotional and completely satisfying production that it keeps even its most dazzling special effects under control, allowing the mysteries of the human heart and of even the most seemingly simple relationships to take center stage.

Ohio State University's Department of Theatre presents "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" on Thursday and Friday at 7:30 p.m., on Sunday at 3 pm and 7:30 pm, and April 16-20 at 7:30 p.m. in the Roy Bowen Theatre at Drake Center, 1849 Cannon Drive. Tickets can be purchased in person at the Ohio

State Theatre Ticket Office, over the phone at 614-292-2295 during normal business hours, or online through ticketmaster.com.

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