

Spreckels Theater and Alchemia Art and Performance Program Connect Community
By JC Newman

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Simon Stephens' award winning stage adaptation of the Mark Haddon novel, is presented at Spreckels' Bette Condiotte Experimental Theater. It is an emotional story which beautifully expresses the inner workings of a teenage boy's highly logical mind as he moves through some challenging life circumstances.

The play is led by Elijah Pinkham in the lead role of Christopher, a teenage boy who appears to be on the autistic spectrum. Pinkham's Christopher is intuitive, allowing the viewer to empathetically slip inside the character's world of mathematically precise logic softened by fragility, humor, humanity and strength.

The surrounding characters anchor the play. David Yen's Ed, palpably expresses the love of his boy, and the burden that years of fear, self-blame or guilt a single parent may carry. Bronwen Shears' role of Judy truthfully depicts a mother overflowing with love yet tormented by potentially life-destroying decisions. Gina Alvarado's Siobahn, the supportive and enthusiastic teacher, provides a balancing exuberance to Christopher's introversion and an insightful narrative disclosing his inner dialogue. The remaining supporting cast; Jeff Coté, John Craven, Liz Jahren, Lydia Revelos, Chris Schloemp and Ari Vozaitis, play rich and entertaining characters. Their very physical and complex choreography is performed with razor sharp precision. Movements mimic the synapses of Christopher's brain firing along neural pathways as they visually suggest his methodological contemplation. The technical crew provide perfectly timed graphics and special effects, critical to the full experience.

Director Elizabeth (Beth) Craven, described the play's visual treatment:

"The idea was to make visible, the invisible world that exists inside Christopher's head. It's a rethinking of what it would be like to be in that mind. We think sometimes that people that are living on the spectrum as being maybe 'less than' but the truth is they're just in another realm of creativity altogether. He's brilliant! And it gives an insight into what that way of thinking is. It was really a very special experience working on this play."

Sheri Lee Miller, Spreckels' Theater Manager, was aware of the socially conscious aspect of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Upon securing the rights to present it at Spreckels she set out to explore the opportunity to make new connections and bring communities together.

"I'm really proud to bring this play to the Northbay. And I'm excited about this relationship with Alchemia," said Miller.

Alchemia, led by Artistic Director Liz Jahren, is an art and performance program of artists with developmental disabilities. The program has three locations in Santa Rosa, Petaluma and Novato. Miller and Jahren collaborated to expand on the play by putting together an art show in the Spreckels Theater lobby. The show, entitled, *A Spectrum of Creativity*, features Alchemia artists; Artur Valitov of Healdsburg, Tessa Tamborski of Petaluma, Cassandra Griffiths and Colton Bell both of Santa Rosa. Bell also created the artwork for the play's program cover. *A Spectrum of Creativity* is available for viewing during the run of the play.

Jahren discussed the designing of the show:

“I wanted to honor who the lead character is as a human in the world and some of his struggles. I thought it would be interesting to partner with artists from Alchemia that are also on the spectrum. I chose a variety of people because the spectrum is just that, a spectrum. So it’s not like everyone who is living with autism is like Christopher. You know, there are people that are very very different and express themselves differently, from nonverbal situations to [highly] verbal situations. And I tried to represent that in the kind of breadth of [pieces on display].”

Beth Craven reveals, “I have to say, my favorite thing about the play, honestly, [while] there are a lot of painful things about the play, is that moment at the end when [Christopher] realizes he’s able to do whatever he sets his mind to. It’s such a rocket ship going up, and I think it’s very hopeful.”

“I’m really excited about having the art show and having these artists speak after a couple of the performances,” says Sheri Miller.

Artist Colton Bell, said, “I liked how the play worked really hard to show us the inside mind of someone on the autistic spectrum. The main character’s mind operates the same way as Cassandra Killian, a character on the television show, *The Librarian*. [Like Christopher], she also visualizes the numbers and shapes and everything.”

Going to theater performances is not always comfortable for individuals with autism or other disabilities and Liz Jahren feels the response from those who have attended either *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* or “*A Spectrum of Creativity*” has been a positive one.

Jahren says, “The [Spreckels] partnership with Alchemia has invited people who have [family] with special needs to bring them to this show. Something that doesn’t always happen because it’s challenging or the performance is long, or there are things that don’t make it user friendly for that segment of our community.”

During the first weekend at a “talk-back” session after the performance, Jahren recalls a young man on the spectrum who had brought his mother and grandparents to see the play.

Jahren quoted the man as saying, “I was able to watch it and identify my own processes. The most exciting thing was my family got to see an external view of some of my internal struggles.”

Watching the effect this experience has had on Alchemia’s participating artists, Jahren had this to say:

“[I believe] presenting their art in the show has made them feel valued, worthwhile and elevated their feeling of community and personal pride. It did something magical for them as artists. I’m really grateful to both Beth [Craven] and Sheri [Miller] for helping to facilitate this opportunity.”

Sheri Miller looks forward to more collaborations, saying, “I would like to do more of this with our shows, where we partner with another organization and enrich the plays in that way. I think it’s cool. We have this enormous gorgeous lobby so it really lends itself to this sort of thing.”

Anyone can view Alchemia's art show in the Spreckels Theater lobby at 5409 Snyder Lane, Rohnert Park, CA, during the running of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, which closes September 30th.

Alchemia has three locations where artists' work can be viewed; 111 Kentucky Street, Petaluma, 1515 3rd Street at the Society of Artist (MSA) in San Rafael and 1123 Grant Street, Novato, which will be opening the end of October. Visit Alchemia's website at www.Alchemia.org for more information.