Written by Mike Schulz
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Generally, when attending a play at Geneseo's Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, it doesn't matter where you sit; the venue's shows are presented theatre-in-the-round-style, and more often than not, Richmond Hill's directors stage their works accordingly, giving audiences a fine view of the action from anywhere in the house.

For its production of David Auburn's *Proof*, however, the theatre's playing area has been transformed into a three-quarter-thrust stage (*Proof*'s front-porch setting designed against the Barn's fourth wall), and at the Friday-night performance I attended, the "best seats in the house," directly facing the set, were already filled by the time I arrived; instead, I took a seat on the stage-left side of the theatre. But for future *Proof* audiences - and I hope that includes many, many of you - who may find themselves in a similar situation, I'm here to tell you not to sweat the view in the least.

If I hadn't been seated on that side of the theatre, I wouldn't have seen Jessica Nicol's exquisite, sad smile, mixed with a hint of pride, when mathematician Hal informed Nicol's Catherine of the genius proof he recently discovered. I would have been deprived of Stacie Kintigh's delicate anguish as Catherine's sister, Claire, when she implores the math whiz to leave her emotionally shaky sibling alone. I wouldn't have fully registered the comic tenderness of David Kintigh's Hal, as Catherine hints at the extent of her intellect, and Hal finds himself in unfamiliar emotional terrain. And I would have missed the uncertainly in Craig Michaels' eyes as his math professor, Robert, desperately tries to convince daughter Catherine of his sanity.

These were all moments that, in director Jennifer Kingry's staging of *Proof*, anyone sitting direct-center would have missed, and they underline my absolute favorite thing about attending shows at Richmond Hill.

At the Barn, your close proximity to the actors - coupled with the audience, as a whole, effectively *surrounding* the actors - makes it impossible for a phony performance to sneak through without your noticing; the actors, literally, have nowhere to hide. And when one of their shows is acted with the sincerity and commitment of Richmond Hill's current presentation, the effect is exhilarating. There *can't* be a bad seat in the house at *Proof*, because the production's four actors are so fully in character, and give their roles such a breadth of physical and vocal detail, that you'll catch thrillingly honest, telling moments no matter which actor you focus on, and no matter where your seat is located. The only shame is that it's impossible to catch them *all*.

The role of Catherine is one of the meatiest in contemporary theatre, yet Jessica Nicol never makes a point of this fact; she gives a great performance by never calling attention to her greatness. Everything about Nicol's focused, lived-in portrayal feels true - Catherine's depression, her anger, her sardonic humor - and the actress is smart enough to subtly change her rhythms depending on which character she's speaking to. With Robert, she's empathetic yet imploring, gently attempting to coax him away from madness; with Hal, her witty defenses rise and, just as suddenly, fall; with Claire, years of sisterly resentments seem to burst forth in sarcasm and impatience. Catherine has been written extraordinarily well, and Nicol fully honors Auburn's accomplishment.

Nicol's co-stars couldn't make for a better match. Stacie Kintigh's Claire, gently trying not to rock Catherine's boat, makes the character's apologetic shallowness incredibly touching, and her line readings are slyly funny; Claire, with Catherine, is only *acting* the ditz. Kintigh's real-life husband, David, has a voice that cracks like an adolescent's (at times, his deliveries sound uncannily like David Schwimmer's) and gives a completely winning, open-hearted performance, and as Robert, Craig Michaels is enjoyably inscrutable, and plays opposite Nicol with deft sweetness.

Under Kingry's inspired direction, Richmond Hill's *Proof* quartet creates stage magic in an already magical piece of drama, no matter which seat you choose; audience members could probably situate themselves *behind* the set and still feel the effect of this ensemble's talents.

For tickets, call (309)944-2244.