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THEATER REVIEW | 'A DISAPPEARING NUMBER'

Human (and Mathematical) Equations

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#)

Zeroes, ones, twos and threes glide and slide, shimmy and leap before your eyes in the quietly mesmerizing play “A Disappearing Number,” a production from the British company [Complicite](#) that plays through Sunday as part of the [Lincoln Center Festival](#). The familiar little digits we use for all sorts of mundane purposes, like marking time and counting money, slowly begin to acquire talismanic power as they swim across the video screens onstage or blink from a clock in the corner.

They get inside your head too. By the conclusion of this engrossing inquiry into the beauty of mathematics and the equations that bind human destinies, even the most casual numerical series — your phone number, say, or that cabby’s ID — may begin to take on mystical significance.

Don’t worry about bringing scratch paper and a No. 2 pencil. Math-phobes need have no fear that the play will feel like a statistics lecture or an evening of enforced Sudoku. Sure, there is some daunting talk of [string theory](#) and convergent series and the cosine of half pi Z, not to mention the varieties of infinity.

But “A Disappearing Number,” which is conceived and directed by [Simon McBurney](#), and which snapped up all the major new-play awards in London when it was first produced in 2007, is lucid, dynamic and continuously engaging. It’s not fundamentally about numbers, either, but about the search for meaning and the consoling satisfaction of finding the patterns that define and describe both the physical universe and individual human lives.

The British mathematician G. H. Hardy (David Annen), a central character in the play, put it succinctly in his book “A Mathematician’s Apology,” which is quoted from repeatedly. “A mathematician, like a painter or a poet, is a maker of patterns,” he wrote. “And beauty is the first test.”

Ruth Minnen (an enchanting Saskia Reeves), the fictional math professor in the play, kicks things off by scribbling a fantastical series of numbers on a big dry eraser board at the center of the set. She invokes those words of Hardy, one of her heroes, in inviting us to see how these two seemingly baffling series of numbers are related.

“Look at this in a new way,” she earnestly urges, “and a hidden pattern emerges which connects the two sides of the equation in the most extraordinarily beautiful way.”

“A Disappearing Number” itself puts before us two human equations whose interconnections are gradually teased out and clarified across an intermissionless two hours. As usual, Mr. McBurney avoids linear storytelling, creating instead more complicated spatial and temporal patterns, refracting the narrative to mirror the complex ideas being discussed.

The production, designed by Michael Levine, blends film and video projections (by [Sven Ortel](#)), music (by [Nitin Sawhney](#)) and Indian dance to collate in vivid theatrical terms a contemporary tale and a historical one. Despite the leaps back and forth in time, and the crisp splicing together of scenes set in disparate places, the production unfolds with the seamless fluidity of one of those electronic stock tickers that smoothly spins out the numbers that glare from buildings in Times Square.

In one of the two central relationships, Ruth, who teaches at a British university, becomes involved with an American hedge fund manager from Los Angeles, Al Cooper (Firdous Bamji). Al casually steps into one of Ruth’s lectures and becomes bewitched and haunted by the notion that there is “an infinity of infinities,” as Ruth puts it. We learn early on that their happy

union has been severed by tragedy, but the lineaments of their relationship only gradually form into a clear pattern.

This fairly conventional love story is contrasted with the intellectual passion shared by Hardy and the brilliant Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan (Shane Shambhu), whom Hardy wistfully describes in a 1936 Harvard lecture as “the most romantic figure in the recent history of mathematics.” The story of his career is indeed remarkable, and among the chief pleasures of the play is its sympathetic exploration of his personal odyssey.

[Ramanujan](#) was a humble clerk making all of £20 a year in India in 1913 when he sent a letter to Hardy, already a renowned mathematics lecturer at Cambridge, which contained an astonishing series of theorems that revealed him to be a potential genius. Hardy invited Ramanujan to come to Cambridge so they could work together, and their seven-year collaboration would lead to discoveries on the part of Ramanujan that would prove fundamental to the development of string theory decades later.

These parallel histories are linked by the show’s narrator of sorts, a physicist named Aninda Rao (Paul Bhattacharjee). A genial fellow who specializes in string theory and also reveres Ramanujan, Aninda will encounter Al when they find themselves on the same plane to India, both searching for a final accounting of the life of a loved one.

The bright intellectual sheen of “A Disappearing Number” is softened, and the play’s dramatic thrust is enhanced, by the excellence of the acting ensemble. Each performer creates a precise, individual and rounded portrait of these quasi eggheads. There are similarly fine contributions from Divya Kasturi and Chetna Pandya in smaller roles. (Ms. Pandya has a funny voiceover role as a chirpy phone company call-center worker who exasperates Al when he tries to have his wife’s phone number switched to his.)

There are perhaps a few stray ideas in the play that are never cogently explored. At one point we get a blast of statistics about the disappearance of honey bees in America that doesn’t seem to connect with anything else. But for the most part the production evokes and exemplifies the pleasure of discovering the vital connections between theory and reality, past and present, and the lives of human beings separated by time, space or the brutal fact of tragedy.

“All beautiful theorems require a very high degree of economy, unexpectedness and inevitability,” the string-theory specialist Aninda tells us after elucidating one of Ramanujan’s formulas. That’s not a bad recipe for beautiful theater either, and it is one that Mr. McBurney’s scintillating drama, strongly seasoned as it is with numbers, fulfills to the letter.

A Disappearing Number

Conceived and directed by Simon McBurney; devised by the Company; partly inspired by G. H. Hardy’s book “A Mathematician’s Apology”; music by Nitin Sawhney; design by Michael Levine; lighting by Paul Anderson; sound by Christopher Shutt; projections by Sven Ortel; costumes by Christina Cunningham; associate director, Douglas Rintoul; production manager, Jamie Maisey; produced by Judith Dimant. A Complicite production, presented by the Lincoln Center Festival, Nigel Redden, director. At the David H. Koch Theater, Lincoln Center; (212) 721-6500. Through Sunday. Running time: 1 hour 50 minutes.

WITH: David Annen (G. H. Hardy), Firdous Bamji (Al Cooper), Paul Bhattacharjee (Aninda Rao), Hiren Chate (Tabla Player), Divya Kasturi (Mother/University Cleaner/Dancer), Chetna Pandya (Surita Bhogaita/Barbara Jones), Saskia Reeves (Ruth Minnen) and Shane Shambhu (Srinivasa Ramanujan/Dancer).

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