

Arts In LA

Theater Reviews

Completeness

VS. Theatre Company and Firefly Theater and Film, at VS. Theatre

Reviewed by Travis Michael Holder



Emily Swallow and Stephen Klein

Photo by Ed Krieger

She's a grad student studying yeast cultures; he's working on algorithms. With the exception of Tom Stoppard, Itamar Moses is the only playwright who could write a talky two-act play in which two horny young college science geeks (Emily Swallow and Stephen Klein) use incessant technologically savvy conversation as foreplay for hot sex.

Molly and Elliot meet in a college library where each is distracted from the glowing light of computer screens by the presence of the other. Soon they have retreated to Elliot's dorm room in the guise of establishing a work connection, but, of course, before long they are humping like rabbits ("I love the moment when you're suddenly allowed to touch someone," Elliot proclaims). In record time, they dump their current friends with benefits (Nicole Erb and Rob Nagle) in favor of exploring the possibly passionate future of what might prove to be newly minted potential soulmates.

The sensations of their new relationship lead the lovers on. Between orgasms they sit on Elliot's bed in their underwear, discussing the usual emotional scars of past loves, tentatively exploring what surprises might emerge from beneath the studied flannel-shirted nerd-wear ("I

feel like I tricked you into thinking I'm happy or interesting or fun to be around," Molly warns), and hesitantly deliberating whether those pesky stars might actually be in alignment this time around. It isn't long, though, before they begin to sniff out other prospective mates (all played by Erb and Nagle) entering into their daily lives, making the journey of Molly and Elliot more rocky than a hike down Runyon Canyon after dusk.

This play must be a roller coaster to interpret, in danger of drowning in Moses's ever-present textual dexterity, a palpable presence that could easily come off as bang-on-the-head pretentiousness. In lesser hands, *Completeness* might turn out to be anything but complete, but this mounting is blessed with a quartet of exquisitely multilayered, bittersweet performances that honor and match its author's tech-swollen dialogue. His jigsaw puzzle of a play is able to rise above its inherent traps thanks to the commitment of its obviously driven cast, the understated but passionate vision of director Matt Pfeiffer, and Darcy Scanlin's incredibly smart, strikingly spare, versatile set design ingeniously filling VS. Theatre Company's challenging playing space.

The message is clear even if, alas, no answers are offered. Behind the scientific and technological loquaciousness that spews in torrents from these characters' mouths, there's an abundance of Chekhovian subtext that reveals in a snap that these are all are people broken well before their years. "This is just a terrible time in all our lives," Molly admits, "and a terrible, terrible generation to be a part of." Technical advances in all our lives, it seems, have trumped and all but eliminated our old values and most established rules of human engagement. There's nothing new to be offered beneath Moses's clever, sharply contemporary dialogue, which in the final analysis is a sad indictment of the state of anthropological interaction in our wildly stepped-up, media-obsessed society.

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Nov. 7-Dec. 7. 5453 W. Pico Blvd., West Los Angeles. Metered parking until 8p.m. Thu-Sat 8pm, Sun 2pm. \$25. (323) 739-4411.

www.vstheatre.org