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THEATER REVIEW

COMPLETENESS

by Margaret Gray

In Itamar Moses' "Completeness" at VS. Theatre, pillow talk turns scientific when two attractive grad students, computer scientist Elliot (Steven Klein) and molecular biologist Molly (Emily Swallow), strike up a flirtation in the university computer cluster. Elliot offers to develop an algorithm to interpret Molly's data on yeast proteins.

Science may be a mere pretext for sex here, but sex doesn't stop these two from talking about science. A lot. In the bedroom they can shut off their cellphones but not their buzzing brains. Being in separate fields provides them remarkably unforced opportunities to lecture each other and the audience.

Director Matt Pfeiffer keeps the pace brisk and natural, and the actors are eloquent. Amply laced with the conversational "like" and "you know, their shtick sometimes sounds a little canned anyway - and this may be one of Moses' points: Scientists, like everybody else these days, have to sell themselves. After Elliot hops out of bed to illustrate a stubborn problem on a whiteboard, Molly asks him if he's done this routine for girls before. "I knew it. This is your A material!" she crows, flattered.

Still, Elliot and Molly are both so cerebral that their story would feel a little dry if it weren't for their assorted other love interests, played with humor and poignancy by Nicole Erb and Rob Nagle. As Elliot's ex, Lauren, Erb struggles to express the primordial rage of the woman scorned in computer science lingo ("The parameters... she helplessly begins.) Nagle is especially amusing as Don, Molly's professor and former lover, whose academic advice is infected by sexual jealousy.

Darcy Scanlin's set seems to confine cast and audience inside a computer. Onstage, the walls fold out to become desks and beds. But as a gimmicky but fun meta-theatrical twist spells out for us in the second act, computers can malfunction too. For all our technological advancements, we might as well be Neanderthals when it comes to love.