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## COMPLETENESS

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WOW!

Finding one's soulmate proves every bit as complicated as the algorithms computer science nerd Elliot uses to charm molecular biology grad student Molly in Itamar Moses's *Completeness*, now being given a pitch-perfect first Los Angeles production by Vs. Theatre Company and Firefly Theater & Films.

Did I mention that *Completeness* is a romantic comedy that could just as easily have starred Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan in their romcom heyday?



It is, and with Steven Klein and Emily Swallow standing in for Tom and Meg as a pair of grad students who meet cute one day in the university computer lab, *Completeness*'s L.A. Premiere could hardly be in more capable, charismatic hands.

Is it accident, fate, or a clever bit of planning on both their parts that brings these two attractive science nerds together? Regardless of which it is, Elliot has arrived in Molly's life (or at least at her computer station) just in time to help with the biology student's yeast culture experiments and maybe even come up with an algorithm to simplify her search for results.

There's only one catch. The word "simplify" is relative, and like *The Theory Of NP-Completeness* that gives Moses's play its title, the multiple choices that that Elliot and Molly find themselves making on a minute-to-minute—if not second-to-second—basis add up to an infinity of possible outcomes. In other words, a happy ending is far less of a sure thing for our would-be soul mates than it was for Tom and Meg in *Sleepless In Seattle*, *Joe Vs. The Volcano*, or *You've Got Mail*.

It's not that Elliot and Molly aren't ripe for new relationships, or at least for getting out of their current ones.

Elliot is at the tail end of a rebound romance with Lauren (Nicole Erb), a young woman who could, in the words of Stephen Sondheim, "drive a person crazy," and by person, I mean anyone. (Fortunately, Lauren's particular brand of crazy-driving makes for some of the funniest dialog you're likely to hear all year.)

Molly too has come to the end of the relationship road with Don (Rob Nagle), her faculty advisor, and falling for someone more or less her academic equal might be more advisable than the power imbalance of her current romance.



Still, just as the course of true love never did run smooth in Shakespeare's day, its contemporary path runs not a tad smoother for Elliot and Molly, and once science talk has served its seductive purpose, the duo seem bent on sabotaging their relationship as each has done time and time again, he by looking for a way to unstick himself and she simply to disappear.

Director Matt Pfeiffer and his sensational cast strike precisely the right tone to make *Completeness's* braininess as appealing as its two leads.

Klein's Elliot has so much nerdy sex appeal and charm that it's no wonder he manages to snag a woman as easy on the eyes as Molly, while Swallow, fresh from Donald Margulies' *The Country House* at the Geffen, radiates girl-next-door loveliness and like her costar, shows off acting chops and comedic timing to match.



Together, the two leads have oodles of chemistry, both in and out of the sack, in addition to making us believe that they actually understand everything they're saying, which they just may do.

I, on the other hand, found much of *Completeness's* science talk going way over my head, though as was the case in its South Coast Repertory World Premiere a few years back, this proves a relatively minor bump on the road to enjoyment.

What matters considerably more is Moses's manifest understanding of male-female Mars-meets-Venus relationships. In other words, audience members are likely to recognize themselves and/or their past or present partners in Elliot and Molly and their exes. In other words, ouch.

Antaeus Company members Erb and Nagle (omitted from production stills) could not be better as said exes, Erb as the passive-aggressive Lauren (who can turn any conversation into the verbal equivalent of an M. C. Escher painting) and Nagle as the almost equally complex Don, both actors doing terrific double duty as well, she as Elliot's undergraduate student Nell and he as Molly's fellow grad student Franklin, and though playwright Moses has thankfully cut the flashback sequences that overcomplicated *Completeness* in its World Premiere, Nagle and Erb do get to make brief, wordless appearances as Elliot and Molly exes Katie and Clark.

By contrast, Moses has pointedly refrained from cutting an Act Two sequence that makes better sense on paper than it does in practice, but since he himself has written, "Be prepared for a lot of people to tell you that this is their least favorite part of the play and that the play would be better without it. This is how you will know you did it right," any attempt by this or any other reviewer to recommend its excision is doomed from the start, and who knows? Perhaps like *Father*, Playwright Knows Best.

Los Angeles producers Johnny Clark and Natalia Duncan have assembled as fine a design team as any writer could ask for, my guess being that if Moses were to see how scenic designer Darcy Scanlin has turned one of L.A.'s smallest playing areas into a wondrously versatile and even expansive-feeling set (the computer circuitry motif is particularly thrilling), he might just rate Scanlin's design as *Completeness's* most astonishing to date.

Tom Ontiveros's lighting and projections, Rachel Myers costumes, Jason Tuttle's sound design, and Stephen Rowan's props too are as good as it gets regardless of theater size or

production budget.

Samantha Franco is production stage manager. David Clark is technical director and Jeremiah Thies technical consultant.

I have it on excellent authority that both the science behind Completeness and its depiction of the oft-stereotyped science nerds who populate it are spot-on.

Still, you neither have to “get” the science nor be anywhere near nerdy to fall under Completeness’s spell. Rarely if ever has smart talk been more appealing than it is when Elliot and Molly start using yeast cultures and algorithms as aphrodisiacs.

VS. Theatre Company, 5453 West Pico Boulevard, Los Angeles. Through July 31.  
Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, at 8:00. Sundays at 2:00. Reservations: 323-739-4411  
[www.vstheatre.org](http://www.vstheatre.org)

–Steven Stanley  
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Photos: Ed Krieger