

“Phenomenal” Incognito Cast Takes the Stage



Incognito: an assumed or false identity. The Gamm’s latest offering sounds like it could be a fun who-dunnit; however, while there are aspects of tabloidesque drama, such as questions of paternity, this play focuses solidly on the lies our brain tells us. No, not the lies we tell ourselves. The lies our brains tell us. As one character notes, “Our brains are working constantly, exhaustively overtime to give us the illusion that we’re in control, but we’re not.” Memory and identity are collectively examined through individual interconnections of the heart in *Incognito*.

Playwright Nick Payne has crafted a brilliant and moving script that weaves together three stories. A pathologist steals the brain of Albert Einstein. A divorced neuropsychologist begins a romance with a younger woman. A seizure patient forgets everything but the woman he loves. The script is full of both head and heart. Theories of neuroscience are intertwined with touching moments of human feeling, all asking the question, “Who am I?”

The three stories contain a total of 21 characters, played by four actors. The actors are dressed from head to toe in shades of gray against a stark white set. The script gives the actors no time for costume changes. Jessica Hill’s set design incorporates a series of light strips that are illuminated with different colors depending on which of the three stories is being played out at the time. Since the audience gets very little context from costume changes or props, the subtle lighting shifts are the only clue to changes in storyline.

That is, the only clues outside of the actors themselves. The cast of *Incognito* is phenomenal. The four actors often have to switch characters with seconds (or fewer) between scenes. Tony Estrella has brilliant moments of turning from one scene and immediately beginning another storyline. With instantaneous changes in facial expression, posture, dialect and pacing, he manages to keep each character cleanly individual. Casey Seymour Kim and Michael Liebhauser both have strokes of genius in their own character choices. Kim is especially good at clarifying the age of her characters. While Karen Carpenter is strong in each of her roles, she has a harder time maintaining the crisp accents or individualizing her character choices. To show affection, she often drapes herself over the person receiving her attention, and causes momentary confusion about which character she is playing at the time.

This is more a problem with Tyler Dobrowsky’s direction than it is a fault in Carpenter’s acting choices. Dobrowsky’s direction is uninspired. Payne is specific about having a bare, unpretentious set on which to construct the 21 identities in the world of *Incognito*, giving the director room for creative choices.

Dobrowsky has a strong script and a cast of first-rate actors. Instead of putting his stamp on the material, he falls into the easy trap of allowing the script and the actors to do all of the work. There is something to be said for allowing the script to do its work; however, given the complexities of this script, the audience is relying on the director to keep the characters and storylines clear. Given the simplicity of the set, the audience is relying on the director to keep the actors moving in a way that keeps us visually interested. We don't get these things in this production.

Overall, *Incognito* is beautifully heartbreaking. The set and lighting are beautiful. The acting ensemble of Carpenter, Estrella, Kim and Liebhauser is one of the strongest seen on a Rhode Island stage. The script is smart, funny and poignant. Hearing the script spoken out loud is enough to keep an audience member thinking about it for days. I know I did, and that alone is well worth the ticket price.

Nick Payne's Incognito runs through Dec 10 at The Gamm Theatre, 172 Exchange St, Pawtucket. For tickets, call 401-723-4266 or order online at gammtheatre.org.