

Anna Wostenberg

Broadway

Dr. Sullivan

20 September 2015

The Fantastic Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime:

Honors Contract Essay

Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* is one of the most interesting and heartwarming books I've read in recent years. It's indeed been a while since a fiction book has been able to grip me in the way that Haddon's did and continues to do so. I will admit, then, that I had exceedingly high expectations for the Broadway adaptation of the novel, although I was not sure exactly how it had been adapted to fit a stage play. Needless to say, the production far surpassed all of my expectations. All of them.

I can't even begin to fathom how the director Marianne Elliot was able to envision the final product that he achieved, but I am forever impressed with the magic he was able to create on that stage. The staging alone was a masterpiece and the most unique thing I've seen in years. The entire stage was utilized, quite literally. Christopher even walked on the walls. By essentially transforming the stage into half of a box and a mathematical grid, he was able to transfix the audience and really create the inside of Christopher's brain. This was a very risky way to create this world as it easily could have upstaged the actors, but they were all able to maintain command over the audience. The lighting involved must have been so complicated to set for the lighting designer and that alone is a huge accomplishment. They traced

Christopher's steps at times, creating a map of London, or exposed constellations on the walls. Utilizing the grid like lighting and set really allowed us to experience Christopher's autism first-hand. We went through his meltdowns together; we felt his confusion and internal dilemmas, his panic, his compulsive desire to right wrongs. It was a beautiful experience to learn about how sometimes, events trigger his brain like a light switch. He can't help it.

The sound effects of the play performed hand in hand with the lighting. Each time Christopher had a meltdown there was a loud, electronic sound, as if everything were just shutting down for a while. Having these sound effects helps the audience to understand how the brain functions in a case of Autism. It really does shut down just like that and it can be very difficult to help an Autistic person to open back up after shutting down that way. But these sound effects were a very modern approach at looking at Autism, and I sincerely appreciated it.

Haddon's novel tells Christopher's story from a first person perspective, which I loved. Having worked with children on the autism spectrum for some years with my mother, I had a basic understanding of how their brains process information. But Haddon's novel allowed me a personal experience, a metaphorical window into the mechanics behind someone with autism, which I found fascinating. Everything is so mathematical and logical: Dad killed the dog; I can't trust Dad; the only option is to go to Mom. I appreciated, however, that the play gave more of a third person perspective, as well; how much of the story was seemingly narrated by Christopher's teacher. I think that was an excellent choice Simon Stephens, the playwright. It really helped to move the play along and make sure the audience

followed the nuances of Christopher's life closely. The plot remained incredibly true to the book, which is vitally important to me as a lover of books. All the big events remained the same and it really didn't deviate from Haddon's original concept.

Obviously when a novel is being adapted to a play or a film, many small details need to be removed. And while Haddon's novel is absolutely filled with fascinating and endearing musings of Christopher, which I loved reading and I thought developed his character immensely, I appreciated the ones that Stephens chose to keep in the play. The brief monologue that Christopher has where he speaks about the stars is so chilling, but it doesn't sadden Christopher and so it doesn't sadden me. The way the lines were delivered was, quite simply, beautifully done. And many of the other musings were perfectly placed throughout the play to break the intensity with delicious drops of comedic honesty to keep the audience from focusing too deeply on the haunting struggles that Christopher faced. The whole play was like a beautifully polished poem, tracing the journey of this young boy on his way to learning to forgive and trust again. It was a poem I could read and listen to over and over again.

I firmly believe, however, that I was only so enamored due to the incredible performances by the actors. I believed every single one. There wasn't a single actor who was weaker than the others, as is often seen in theatre. Perhaps this was so because most of the cast was performing their final show, but it doesn't even matter to me if that was the case. Despite it being a drama, the entire show was so delicately choreographed and the actors floated around the stage, especially ALAN SHARP. Scenes where the supporting cast literally carried Christopher around so he

could walk on walls or do flips between their arms captivated me and perfectly captured the mental chaos present inside Christopher's brain. And incorporating the trap doors and trap cubbies to hold all the props was so awesome in the dictionary definition of the word. Watching Christopher pull more and more train tracks out of the most random places on stage was so cool and it always kept me on my feet. I didn't know what anyone was going to pull out next. That was an ingenious way to incorporate props into a play as fluid as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, with few actual scene endings or beginnings. The boxes that were on stage were utilized so well, too! I never would have expected that one of them would turn into a toilet in order to create that hilariously distressing short scene. It was so clever. And the way the supporting cast would move to help create the world, especially the scene on the train where everyone would sway or stumble together to simulate the motion of a train was beautiful. So very dance-like and fascinating.

And while I now consider myself a bit of a Broadway snob because I've taken this class three times and have made a point to see as many additional shows as possible, I almost always find myself saying I have a new favorite show. So I realize that my saying *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* is my new favorite show may not hold much merit, but I so genuinely mean it this time. I've never seen such a passionate, endearing, emotional, exhausting, funny performance before. I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have been granted the opportunity to see this original cast's last performance together and what I imagine was also one of their best.