

'Curious Incident' sees world through an autistic boy's eyes

Highly recommended for an evening of fine but challenging drama

<https://morganhilllife.com/2023/11/21/curious-incident-review/>

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Photo by Chris Foster

By Camille Bounds

A brilliant but troubled boy takes center stage in South Valley Community Theatre's gripping and thoughtful production of "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time."

I was stunned by the depth of this excellent production. It deals compassionately with the complex relationships in a family dealing with a psychological condition many mothers and fathers in the South Valley must also face with their own children. This is one production the audience must pay close attention to for its deep theatrical energy and humane meaning.

Simon Stephens' Tony Award-winning adaptation of Mark Haddon's bestselling novel opened Nov. 17 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse and runs until Dec. 9.

Kyle Strenfel gives a stunning and committed performance as "Christopher Boone," an autistic teenager who embarks on a quest to solve the mysterious killing of his neighbor's dog. With keen attention to detail, he movingly conveys the 15-year-old's unique sensory processing and intense focus from being on the autism spectrum. This especially hits the audience in moments of overstimulation, when flashing lights, sound effects, and video projections designed by Peter Mandel ingeniously place us inside Christopher's overwhelmed mind.

Anchoring the show is Maddy Khachadorian as Christopher's teacher and mentor "Siobhan," a guiding light who provides him with warmth and encouragement. Christopher's parents "Judy" and "Ed" (Sindu Singh and David Scott) deliver nuanced performances, depicting the complexities of caring for a neurodiverse child with empathy and humanity.

As additional characters in the show, Jenny Arbizu, Jonathan Bass, Michael Grimm, Carol Harris, Marilyn Pifer and Jeff Swan bring believability and add important information to the complicated plot.

First time director Scott Lynch adeptly leads the talented ensemble, crafting Christopher's journey as one that both educates and inspires. Producer Elizabeth Mandel has brought together a fine group of SVCT artists and volunteers to make a strong production. Christine Carrillo does a magnificent job in choreographing scenes where actors must move in strict precision, such as at a London Underground station. Backstage, Oliver Oliphant, Mackenzie Brown and Clara Shem-Tov handle the smooth running of the show throughout the production.



Due to strong language, parental guidance is recommended.

Transporting audiences into the perspective of an autistic teenager is no easy feat, but the performers rise to the challenge with nuance and care in their poignant production of a young man who investigates the mysterious killing of his neighbor's dog, only to uncover shocking truths about his family in the process.

"The Curious Incident of the Dog in The Night-Time" is highly recommended for an evening of fine but challenging drama. By the uplifting conclusion, audiences have an insightful window into autism along with a celebration of Christopher's hard-won accomplishments. Proving theatrical storytelling can illuminate diverse perspectives with compassion, SVCT's thoughtful production of "The Curious Incident" is a triumphant must-see.

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South Valley Civic Theatre's 'Curious Incident' opens Nov. 17

November 8, 2023



Kyle Strenfel stars as Christopher Boone in South Valley Civic Theater's "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time," opening Nov. 17 in Morgan Hill. Photo by Chris Foster, graphics by Jason Leong

South Valley Civic Theatre's "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" opens Nov. 17 and runs select days through Dec. 9 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse.

The Tony Award-winning play is based on a novel about 15-year-old Christopher Boone, who is suspected of killing his neighbor's dog and sets out to identify the true culprit. What makes his detective work unique is that Christopher is on the Autism spectrum; although he is brilliant and logical he is often overwhelmed by the world around him and puzzled in social situations.

Four projectors (three walls and floor) have been set up in the playhouse, with choreographed crowd scenes, sound and lights, all providing the audience with Christopher's perspective, including frequent sensory overload.

Projection and lighting designer Peter Mandel first started planning for this production almost four years ago, when it was initially scheduled to open in the fall of 2020. Since then, he has been collecting projection material for the show and envisioning how it would ultimately be presented.

Director Scott Lynch said he is thrilled to present the powerful messages of the play centered around family and acceptance. The 10-person cast of seasoned actors comes from Hollister, Gilroy, Morgan Hill, Santa Cruz and San Jose.

“The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” runs Fridays and Saturdays at 8pm, and Sundays and Nov. 18 at 2pm, through Dec. 9. Nov. 25 will be an inclusive performance.

For information and tickets, visit svct.org/2023_curious.

Entertainment: SVCT explores autistic mind in family drama

“Curious Incident” opens Nov. 17 at the Morgan Hill Playhouse

<https://morganhilllife.com/2023/11/08/svct-curious-incident/>

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Photo by Chris Foster

By Calvin Nuttall

Transporting audiences inside the mind of an autistic teenager is no easy feat, but South Valley Civic Theatre is determined to unravel this perspective intricately and responsibly in their upcoming production of “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,” by Simon Stephens.

When “Christopher Boone” finds his neighbor’s dog has been murdered, he takes it upon himself to track down the culprit. Audiences will watch the mystery unfold through his eyes as he investigates and discovers far more than just the identity of the killer.

Directed by Scott Lynch and starring Kyle Strenfel as Christopher, the show opens Nov. 17 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse. Due to some strong language and adult themes, SVCT recommends parental guidance for pre-teens.

Not only is Christopher the central character, but the play is written as if he himself were the playwright. As such, his neurodivergent perspective of the world is central to the entire show, from its dialogue and narration to its scene structure and staging.

“It’s so important for people to learn to respond with understanding and empathy,” Lynch said. “I think people have stereotypic views of autism. Our objective is to have the audience walk away with an emotional response that makes them more empathetic and sympathetic and knowledgeable of this condition and how it impacts families.”

The cast and crew have worked to ensure their portrayal of Christopher and his family are accurate and respectful. This has included consulting with real life parents of autistic children.

“It’s been a very humbling experience,” said Strenfel, 16. “It’s definitely something I’ve never done before. The important thing is finding the right resources to see what autism looks like, and then try to put myself in (Christopher’s) shoes and bring him to life. It’s a lot of trying to understand people who are on the spectrum. It has been an amazing lesson for myself about how humanity works.”



Photo by Chris Foster

Christopher has great difficulty processing information, and in chaotic situations these difficulties are intensified. At one point in the play, he finds himself at a train station in London, a noisy and chaotic place where he becomes completely overstimulated.

“A person who is not on the spectrum would be able to block out certain aspects of that environment so they can stay focused on what they need to do,” Strenfel said. “But for someone like Christopher, he has to take in all of that information at once. That is really difficult to communicate to the audience, because you don’t have that chaos in your head.”

In order to convey what Christopher feels in these scenes, SVCT employs multiple technological tools including flashing lights, sound, and projector effects to recreate the thoughts and information swirling in his head.

In these moments of stress, Christopher turns to mathematics to stabilize himself. Despite his impairment in other areas, he is a mathematical savant, and being allowed into the A-level math course at his school is a constant goal for him throughout the show.

“He knows that this is something he wants to do,” Strenfel said. “It is one of the constants in his life and one of the things he can focus on when everything else is chaotic, and helps him keep himself together in a lot of stressful moments.”

Despite his talent, his school does not want to allow Christopher into this course due to his young age, even though he is well beyond the learning level required. Thankfully, he has a strong advocate in “Siobhan,” his teacher and mentor, played by Maddy Khachadorian.



Photo by Chris Foster

“Siobhan is the one character in the show that, no matter what is occurring with Christopher, is always there and wanting to guide and support him,” Khachadorian said. “She has this warmth about her that makes Christopher comfortable enough to confide and be responsive with her when many of the characters don’t have the patience for it.”

As he moves through the world in search of his answers, Christopher’s journey highlights many of the real-world ways in which our society fails people like him.

“For me, this play brings out a lot of questions about accessibility,” Khachadorian said. “We can see how uncomfortable and overstimulated Christopher is throughout a lot of it, and then we can see moments where he is feeling a moment of reprieve. When we see that, we see him when he is at his happiest. I find that to be very special.”

Christopher’s parents, Judy and Ed Boone, are also central to the story as his caregivers, and are themselves complex and flawed. While he investigates the murder of the dog, Christopher discovers shocking revelations about their actions and relationship.

“As a society, we tend to be very judgemental about people and situations when we’re on the outside of them,” said Sindu Singh, who plays Judy Boone. “The perspective that Judy brings is to allow you to understand how difficult it is for the caregivers, the people who surround the lives of differently-abled people. It is very easy to sit in judgment of them, but when you actually see their day-to-day, and how much they actually want to make it work, I think there is a level of empathy and compassion to be had.”

Christopher’s perspective lends a unique neutrality to the moral issues of his parents’ behavior, Singh said. He is direct and non-judgemental, and this forces the audience to consider things differently and reevaluate their assumptions about Ed and Judy.

“It is a very contentious relationship, but they are both incredibly loving in their different ways,” Singh said. “They are very different people, and they deal with the situation in their lives very differently. They are broken, like all of us are in some way or another, but there is no question that they are both committed to their child.”

First and foremost, “The Curious Incident” is a human story, Singh said. All the characters’ human flaws are completely visible to the audience, and that is what makes the story well-portrayed in a way that will have audiences emotionally engaged.

“You’re going to laugh, you’re going to cry, you’re going to feel, you’re going to actually be curious – after all, who did kill the dog?” she said. “You’re going to be blown away by how it is all presented. There is a massive team of incredibly talented people who have all come together to put this show on. It is just mesmerizing.”

Through his journeys, Christopher learns and grows, discovering new ways to cope with his condition and inspiring the people around him to learn more about how to accommodate his needs. By the end of the show, he has moments of confidence and accomplishment that will make audiences want to celebrate with him, Lynch said.

“You empathize with his parents’ pride in their son,” he said. “Even if your kids aren’t neurodiverse, you celebrate their moments, and what this play does is illustrate that there is a spectrum of moments and a spectrum of achievements. Everybody has things that they seek after, and Christopher is no different. We have to learn to celebrate those moments for everybody.”