Proof

Honored with a Pulitzer Prize as the Best Drama of 2001, *Proof* has had stellar runs in New York, London, and numerous regional theaters (Arena Stage offered a moving production recently). David Auburn's play has now received serious filmic treatment with a screenplay co-written by the playwright, a starry cast, and the ministrations of English director John Madden (*Mrs. Brown*, *Shakespeare in Love*). Earnest as this effort is, however, the film version falls short of its theatrical impact.

Gwyneth Paltrow is Catherine (a part she played on the London stage, directed by Madden) a 25-year old woman who has spent five years caring for her father, the late Robert Llewellyn (Anthony Hopkins), a once sterling University of Chicago mathematician (when in his twenties) who slid into delusion. On the eve of his funeral she must cope with his death and also with the thought that she may have inherited some of her father's genius as well as his "tendency to instability."

Flashbacks indicate that she has given up her own academic ambitions to minister to her troubled father as his mind dissipated. A graduate math student, Hal Dobbs (Jake Gyllenhaal), who has been reviewing her father's papers, finds what looks to be a seminal work, while Catherine's visiting sister Claire (Hope Davis) tries to rechannel her sister's life away from her father-worship. The crux of the drama occurs when Hal discovers a breakthrough mathematical proof in number theory which he logically assumes that Robert has developed but which Catherine claims to have written. *Proof* thus becomes a question of what is "the proof of the proof."

The cast and director struggle hard to make this familial/ intellectual story, significantly told in flashbacks, work. Though its setting is the University of Chicago neighborhood and Chicago-area sites, most of the film was shot in England. The on-location shooting in the Windy City is basically used for "opening up" the action, a common trait when one-set plays are converted into films. While this opening up adds some visual interest and permits us to see the troubled Catherine outside the confines of her Southside home (a handsome set, by the way), it adds little to the drama.

There is, of course, a built-in dilemma with theater pieces converted to motion pictures. The former primordially depend on the Word (and the conviction of the actors who deliver them) while the latter incorporate words, yes, but deliver them coated with imagery, with photography that mimics the real world. *Proof* may be a thoughtful drama on paper, but this cinematic version loses a dimension. The transfer to the screen is made the more difficult because this is a play which treats, however lightly, ideas and mathematical concepts--whims of the mind--for which there is no concrete equivalent on celluloid.

Gwyneth Paltrow has assayed "serious" parts before (as in the recent film *Sylvia,* based on the life of Sylvia Plath), and she certainly knows this role: she was the lead in the London stage version, also directed by John Madden. Her Catherine gives off some of the right vibes of the disaffected, neurasthenic young woman, but her modelish looks tend to work against her; it is hard to believe she is truly buried in painful self-examination (perhaps the movie's prevalence of close-ups is at work here, imagery not feasible on stage). Anthony Hopkins as her mathematician father is effective in his quieter moments, but he can be disconcertingly abrupt and declamatory, like he is playing to the back seats rather than to the close-up camera. Jake Gyllenhaal as Hal

Dobbs is too studly to appear nerdish and seems to be more callow than intellectual. The fine Hope Davis makes the insensitive "heavy" Claire more nuanced than expected in the thankless role of "the one who just doesn't understand."

With Madden's *Proof,* we may sense some of the ache of its characters, but we don't really succeed at getting at their minds.

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