

Lovers Catherine (Gwyneth Paltrow) and Hal (Jake Gyllenhaal).



CHUCK HODES, MIRAMAX FILMS, 2005.

Mathematics and Love

Concrete answers vs. intangible values

PROOF: Directed by John Madden. Written by David Auburn and Rebecca Miller, based on Auburn's stage-play. Produced by Jeffrey Sharp, John N. Hart Jr., Robert Kessel, Alison Owen. Executive producers, Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein, Julie Goldstein, James D. Stern, Michael Hogan. Cinematography, Alwin Kucheler. Editor, Mick Audsley. Production design, Alice Normington. Costumes, Jill Taylor. Music, Stephen Warbeck. Starring Gwyneth Paltrow, Anthony Hopkins, Jake Gyllenhaal and Hope Davis. Miramax, 2005. PG-13. 100 minutes.

I'm glad I haven't seen a stage production of *Proof*, partly because I can't belabor director John Madden's cinematic choices as director. The film's story is so compact and self-enclosed that my not knowing how the mystery turns out was a pleasant suspense. The film contains a few outdoor scenes that focus on a limited number of people, while many interior scenes are occupied by a single character, such as Catherine (Gwyneth Paltrow) or Robert (Anthony Hopkins), daughter and father, both mathematicians.

As a rule, I think it is a bad decision to allow a playwright or novelist to adapt her or his own work to the screen. To make a compelling work in another medium is very difficult, and few do it as well as a writer without an agenda. To cite a recent example, the third film in the Harry Potter series worked much better with director Alfonso Cuarón and writer Steve Kloves. They broke free of the book's overpowering influence and took the tale to a darker, more satisfying emotional level in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Unlike the other film I reviewed this week, *Capote*, which sets the tone of the film in early shots of Kansas, the establishing shots of the campus of the University of Chicago are impersonal picture postcards that fail to do that for *Proof*. The Gothic architecture of the buildings speaks of Anglican cathedrals and universities such as Cambridge, rather than an American academy for some 75 Nobel laureates, at some time during their careers.

Likewise, the concept of a proof in math terms is a bit out of the realm of many moviegoers. Madden explains proof as a "mathematical formulation in which a particular conjecture or hypothesis as we would understand it can be proved by mathematical deduction to be true." People who try to solve

sudoku puzzles may have their own, more personal understanding of proof, as each number placed in a square must be proved the only possible number to fit there. Takes awhile to get the hang of it, but it's fun.

Nevertheless, films that rely heavily on characters who express themselves through complicated mental disciplines have a hard time connecting with many people in this rabidly anti-intellectual era presided over by George W. Bush. Earlier, even the award-winning *A Beautiful Mind* and the superlative *Kinsey* were not box office bonanzas. If you venture to see *Proof*, you may like it, in part because geniuses are interesting people, even the mad ones such as Robert and Catherine, who has sacrificed her youth, health and career to look after him.

When Catherine's sister, the resolutely ordinary and practical Claire (Hope Davis) arrives in Chicago after their father's death, Catherine can barely relate to her. Claire found a way to survive a crazy father, and now it looks to her like Catherine is going that way, too. Only Hal (Jake Gyllenhaal), a gifted student of Robert's, sees that Catherine is OK, even if he cannot persuade her of it. Catherine has very little to give, but Hal is patient.

In spite of its flaws, *Proof* kept my attention for its duration. I don't understand all of Paltrow's film choices, although she is always worth watching. I thought she was splendid as the depressed poet Sylvia Plath in *Sylvia* (2003), with Daniel Craig as her estranged husband, poet Ted Hughes. *Proof*, however, has more in common with Neil La Bute's *Possession* (2002), in which Paltrow plays a professor drawn in by a literary researcher trying to solve the mystery of two famous Victorians who may have had a clandestine love affair. In both *Possession* and *Proof*, Paltrow shares only a glimpse of the generous, sexually vital character she played to perfection in the delicious *Shakespeare in Love*, also directed by Madden.

Proof is now playing at Cinema World, which is hopefully beginning to bring films to town we might not see otherwise. I highly recommend *Proof* for its intelligent pursuit of a sensitive soul who has retreated from the world and now must come back into it.

EW

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