

HoustonPress

Who's the Mad Genius in *Proof* at 4th Wall Theatre?

A well written Pulitzer Prize winning script keeps us guessing

by [D. L. Groover](#) | September 13, 2026



Meg Rodgers as Catherine and Thomas Prior as Robert in *Proof* at 4th Wall Theatre Co. Credit: Gabriella Nissen

David Auburn's psychological who-done-it, ***Proof***, won the 2001 [Pulitzer Prize for Drama](#) and the Tony Award for Best Play. It is craftily constructed, smart, witty, and everything those august bodies would want in a winner. It is female-centric and deconstructs time in an intelligent way as it gives off its secrets with clever plotting and sly assurance. It is very well-made. On the surface it deals with mathematical "proofs" – an audience yawner – but wisely focuses inevitably on our heroine Catherine (the vibrant and incredible Meg Rodgers), daughter of the brilliant mathematician Robert (Tom Prior, immensely sympathetic even in the throes of Alzheimer's).

For years, she has tended to her sick father, subordinating her college studies, and living in the family's run-down house near Chicago. Her older sister Claire (Laura Kaldis, all big business and big sister), professionally successful and paying all the bills for dad's upkeep, has come back home on the day of his funeral – and Catherine's 25th birthday – to take her away to New York to look after her.

What that means is that sister's afraid that Catherine has inherited dad's madness. She'll pay for her apartment and pay for her "treatment." Catherine's a math genius, too, but her depression has darkened, she sees and talks to dad's ghost in the backyard. Claire wants to help Catherine, but Catherine is adamant, almost mad, in

her determination to find out the “proof” of Robert’s last great theorem. She has inherited her father’s genius, but has she also inherited his madness? Is she fading away?

Into this mixture comes Hal (David Kenner, as a sweet math geek), Robert’s former student who himself is madly in search of Robert’s “proof.” It’s a wonderful aside that his inept rock band comprised of other math geeks plays a number called “Imaginary Number,” which they play in total silence. It’s math joke, but awfully funny at the time. Hal wants to study those notebooks, perhaps find out the unsolvable solution, and make a name for himself before his time has passed him by. He falls for Catherine but doesn’t believe she has solved the equation. Then, in a great Act I closer, Catherine unequivocally reveals that she has done the impossible. That notebook is hers! She has solved Robert’s tome-like problem.

Has she?

Auburn is a master at misdirection, and problems arise with Hal and with Claire, who doesn’t believe her sister competent enough to solve such a complex mathematical equation. The handwriting in the notebook looks just like Robert’s, Hal concurs. Catherine insists it is hers. Why will no one believe her?

The play keeps us guessing, too. Who is falling into madness? Is Tom using Catherine to get himself fame and a prestigious teaching job? Does Claire want Catherine healed or just out of the way? Tricky playwright Auburn doesn’t let on. The ending is sweet and somewhat sentimental, but is it real or Catherine’s imagining of a happy ending?

Proof is a play for adults, skirting around serious issues like dementia, psychosis, and mathematical equations (that none of us understand), but Auburn’s base line is the family dynamic. Who’s in charge when the patriarch goes off the rails? Can grief turn into madness? What ultimately gets inherited through a family?

The superlative four-member cast makes us care. Everyone is a standout, but it’s Rodgers who anchors this play and gets Auburn’s sympathy. This is her play. Rodgers is the recipient of our Houston Theater Award last season as Best Actress in Rec Room’s stunning production of Kushner’s *Angels in America*, and here she goes one better. As Catherine, she’s so natural and empathetic, who can doubt her hidden abilities? Watch as she sits in a chair with her leg curled up under her, as if a child; or look at her reactions to the others when they doubt her. Every move is true. We see ourselves in her.

Prior is bluster and kindness in the same scene; Kenner is puppy dog ambition; while Kaldis shows exasperated compassion for whom she thinks is her damaged sister. **They play beautifully together under director Sophia Watts’ pinpoint direction in Kirk Domer’s weathered back porch set with its dead plants, withered vines, and dirt-covered yard, Christina Giannelli’s autumnal lighting, and Robert Leslie Meek’s subtle evocative sound design.**

It’s damn-near perfect over at 4th Wall. You’ll go mad for it.

Proof continues through October 3 at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and Monday September 28; and 2:30 p.m. Sundays. Spring Street Studios, Studio 101, 1824 Spring Street. For more information, call 832-767-4991 or visit 4thwalltheatreco.com. \$43-\$83.



[D. L. Groover](#)

D.L. Groover has contributed to countless reputable publications including the Houston Press since 2003. His theater criticism has earned him a national award from the Association of Alternative Newsmedia.