

Animals Out of Paper: Origami Play

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In “Animals Out of Paper,” a three-man play now showing at the SF Playhouse (533 Sutter St., San Francisco), *origami* is front, center and all over the stage. Paper hippos, horses, cacti and complex geometric shapes are hanging from the ceiling, propped up on tables and lining the kitchen shelves. *Origami* is framed like art on the wall. It’s been turned into a working lamp and even fashioned into a life-size dress.

Written by Rajiv Joseph and directed by Amy Glazer, this dramatic comedy involves *origami* at every level. Along with providing a colorful backdrop and witty props, *origami* is the central point connecting the play’s three characters — a renowned *origami* expert, a high school calculus teacher and his troubled but brilliant student. *Origami* also serves as a metaphor for life: The crease marks left by folds in paper are made akin to the indelible marks that life and loss leave on the human heart.

Like the paper shapes scattered across the stage, the play’s characters are complex beings, even when the opposite may seem true. Ilana (Lorri Holt), the central character, is a world-class *origami* artist whose life is falling apart. She’s lost her marriage. She’s lost her dog. And she can’t seem to form so much as a crease in a commissioned medical project involving the human heart. Andy (David Deblinger), a schoolteacher and *origami* enthusiast, is her number one fan. And when he brings Suresh (Aly Mawji), a rebellious *origami* prodigy, to be her apprentice, the plot unfolds in a surprising way.

“It’s all twisted into something so far from what it used to be,” Ilana says of *origami*. “I guess it could unfold and become flat again. But it would never be what it was. When it was untouched. Folds leave scars.”

Originally produced in New York in 2008, “Animals Out of Paper” made its West Coast premier in San Francisco this January. While props for the play’s East Coast run were collected via an open call for *origami*, materials for the its West Coast incarnation were made especially by local experts.

Linda Tomoko Mihara, who manages Paper Tree in San Francisco’s Japantown, created many of the play’s key pieces, including two rabbits, some modular *origami*, hearts and a framed configuration of cranes. In addition, Mihara served as the *origami* coach for the actors and also as the play’s *origami* consultant, calling on international *origami* luminaries such as Robert J. Lang, Bernie Peyton, Jeremy Shafer and Meenakshi Mukerji.



‘Escargot’ — Eric Joisel, France’s top origami artist, folded this snail, on display in the Paper Tree’s gallery. Photo by Vivien Kim Thorp

“Each of us is known for something different,” Mihara says of the various *origami* experts, who all reside in Northern California, “So we decided among us who would do what based on their specialty.” Together they created the complex pieces that feature prominently in the script, including a Madagascar Hissing Cockroach, an Amazonian toad, a dancing Tyrannosaurus Rex and multi-colored polyhedrons.

For Mihara, who has been creating *origami* since she was 5 years old, this was the first time her art was presented alongside theater. “I’ve been involved in a lot of community projects, and many projects with Robert Lang,” Mihara says. “I’ve done two commercials for TV that involved *origami* and an installation, but this is the first stage play.”

A passion for *origami* runs in Mihara’s family. Her grandparents, Tokinobu and Hideko Mihara, wrote the first book on *origami* that was published in English in the United States, “*Origami: Japanese Art of Paper Folding*” (1959). Her sister, Vicky Mihara Avery, an expert in Japanese gift-wrapping, appeared as a guest on “The Martha Stewart Show” in 2006. And her parents have now been running the Paper Tree, an *origami* supply store, for 43 years.

Mihara said the portrayal of the *origami* experts is very accurate. “It’s really an interesting slice of life because the writer, Rajiv, actually did some excellent research when it comes to *origami*,” she says. She also added that it felt great to have the art of *origami* acknowledged in such a way on stage.

The original idea for the play emerged after Joseph, who lives in New York, sat next to a woman folding *origami* on a Greyhound bus. In conversation, she explained that she had often taught *origami* to children. “She said most children like *origami*, but every once in a while you come across a special child,” Joseph told the audience after last Saturday’s matinee. “They see a fold before it happens.”

For his research, Joseph attended OrigamiUSA’s national convention in New York along with 900 *origami* artists and enthusiasts. He also befriended filmmaker Vanessa Gould, who was then shooting “Between the Folds” (2008), a documentary about the science and art of *origami*. “She was enormously helpful to me,” says Joseph, “and we became good friends — two people who both lived in Brooklyn, who were both making artistic projects about *origami*.”

Lang, who Joseph first learned of in a “New Yorker” article (Feb. 19, 2007), inspired aspects of Ilana’s character — including the medical device she is struggling to create, which Lang actually designed. During his research, Joseph found many of the practical applications of *origami*, such as air bags, the mesh heart sleeve and telescopes, fascinating. However, it was the “interconnected community of *origamists* around the country and the world” that he found most moving.

“Animals Out of Paper” will be at the SF Playhouse through Saturday, Feb. 27, 2010. For more information or to purchase tickets, call (415) 677-9596 or visit www.sfplayhouse.org. Tickets are \$40. Another Joseph play, “Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo,” which premiered in 2009, will be at the Mark Taper Forum (www.centertheatregroup.org) in Los Angeles from April 14 through May 30.

In addition to selling *origami* paper, supplies and books, Paper Tree (1743 Buchanan St.) has a small gallery space in the front of the store. The current exhibit, “Primates!” features work by Lang and other top *origami* creators, including Brian Chan, Joseph Wu and Sy Chen. The orangutans, gorillas and assorted simians will be on display through April 2010. For Paper Tree’s hours, call (415) 921-7100 or go to www.paper-tree.com.

More work by Mihara and Lang can also be seen on their Websites, www.origamihara.com and www.langorigami.com.

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