

Dramatic tricks abound in new ‘Magic Play’



By **Nelson Pressley** Theater critic April 17 at 1:18 PM

Brett Schneider is a real magician, the kind who buries your chosen card in a flurry of shuffling and makes it hop to the top of the deck anyway, just for openers. The Olney Theatre Center makes a point of declaring in the program and at the door of “The Magic Play” that Schneider is a pro, that audience volunteers are genuine — “no actors or stooges” — and that the live video feed from the camera over the card table at center stage is on the up and up.

Schneider’s authentic magic act is wrapped inside an intriguing new script by Andrew Hinderaker, the Chicago-based writer who made such a splash with his football-crashes-into-ballet drama “Colossal.” Hinderaker has an eye for inside information, for art and craft, and for characters who lose themselves in the absorbing calling of their professions. “Colossal” dramatized a fervent, dedicated, conflicted young man paralyzed by a football injury. In “The Magic Play,”

Schneider's character — called the Magician — is paralyzed by the wreckage of a breakup with his lover, who got tired of being played like a deck of cards.

It's a nifty framework, doubly so because Hinderaker manages to graft the Magician's heartache and personal insecurity into the act that Schneider beguiles us with. One moment he's setting up a trick, and the next, the misty lights toggle on director Halena Kays's seductive staging to show us Daniel, the Magician's ex-lover, slowly bouncing on a high board. The flying effect is lovely, and the acrobatic training is by the Actors Gymnasium, the Chicago group behind the recent "Moby Dick" at Arena Stage. At such moments, "The Magic Play" is an extremely cool-looking show.

Emotionally, the composed Magician is slammed sideways as Daniel — a would-be Olympic diver played with acidic bitterness and fetching wit by Jon Hudson Odom — joins him on stage to banter and bicker about how they met, what their early dates were like, why the relationship fizzled. When they dash off to the pool to re-create an early encounter, the script functions like a compelling play. Lizzie Bracken's set deepens wonderfully, Jesse Belsky's

shrewd blue lights sharply frame the stage while John “Smooch” Medina’s projections add their own mesmerizing effects.

The show also feels like a magic act, because — well, because it is, even as the narrative has Schneider working out some trust issues with the audience. We put ourselves in his hands, happily. The big twist up Schneider and Hinderaker’s sleeves is that by the end, the Magician dares himself to trust us.

The climax directly involves the audience and demands a lot of improvisation, which makes “The Magic Play” a very live act. (As the diver might say, the play’s structure gets high marks for degree of difficulty, even though it’s completely easy to follow.) The writing creaks a bit as it tries to persuade us about the epic nature of the breakup, though Odom’s scalding anger and Schneider’s bruised, halting quality nearly pull off that effect. There’s room for more detail here, and in the too-brief encounter with the father who abandoned the Magician as a boy — though again, the acting is excellent, as Harry A. Winter plays a two-bit magician gigging his way through Reno casinos and birthday parties.

The polished, likable yet skittish Schneider is captivating through all of this, even making the typically awkward business of grabbing

volunteers perfectly nonabrasive. There is a character at work here: His rapport is winning, his routines are confident and he's great at generating anticipation, yet his ego is as fragile as fine glass.

Illusions prop him up, so it seems natural that Tennessee Williams get a mention in this script. The technical adventures of "The Magic Play" keep Hinderaker firmly on the radar as a writer to watch, even if it seems likely that you'll need to see this intensely bespoke drama — a rolling world premiere supported by the D.C.-based National New Play Network — with Schneider in it or not at all.

The Magic Play by Andrew Hinderaker. Directed by Halena Kays. Costumes, Alison Siple; sound, Matthew M. Nielson; magic consultant, Jim Steinmeyer; aerial consultant, Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi; flying effects, D2 Flying Effects. About two hours and 15 minutes. Through May 7 at the Olney Theatre Center, 2001 Olney-Sandy Spring Rd., Olney. Tickets \$20-\$70. Call 301-924-3400 or visit olneytheatre.org.

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