

Goodman Theatre's *The Magic Play* is a genre hybrid that enchants

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Of course there's no such thing as magic. Not in the supernatural sense, anyway. Not in the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" sense, where [Mickey Mouse dons his master's glowing cap and casts a spell on a broom](#), making it tote buckets of water for him. What we choose to call magic comes down to a strategic partnership between physics, psychology, dexterity, and hope.

Nobody understands that better than the magicians themselves--a class of artists simultaneously constrained and enabled by laws of nature, human as well as scientific. And few things demonstrate the partnership's glories and limitations more powerfully than [Andrew Hinderaker's *The Magic Play*](#), getting an impressive world premiere now at Goodman Theatre.

A sophisticated magic show married to an absorbing love story, *The Magic Play* gives us an otherwise unnamed Magician, whose voice we hear before we see him in the flesh. Endearing control freak that he is, he makes an elaborate preshow announcement that urges us toward our best selves ("But if you have all now turned off your phones . . . / You're saying you have faith that whatever's about to happen will be worth being unreachable") even as it promises dire consequences for failure ("If your phone should ring, buzz or light up during the performance . . . / An usher will escort you out of the theater and your ticket will not be refunded").

When he finally appears onstage, the Magician embarks on a show that comes across as equal parts prestidigitation and disquisition (probably not unlike the work of Chicago magician [Jeanette Andrews](#), described in the *Reader's* October 27 [Magic Issue](#)). Played by the incredibly nimble-fingered Brett Schneider, Hinderaker's Magician executes smooth sleight of hand while discussing Shakespeare and the peculiar etiquette that allows theatergoers to pretend they're alone while sitting amid a crowd of people.

But soon enough his show is invaded by an apparition: the memory of a competitive diver—called, yes, the Diver—who became the Magician's lover after the two met cute over a card trick. The Magician's immediate reaction to this intrusion is a little hokey in Halena Kays's otherwise deft staging ("I'm sorry, I was somewhere else . . . , " accompanied by appropriately woozy gestures), yet it leads to a vivid recounting of a romance rendered difficult by the Magician's fear of abandonment, his habitual preoccupation with appearances, and an intense need to limit variables that's understandable in his line of work but toxic to affairs of the heart.

Before we're done we also meet the Magician's magician Father, a Reno hack whose all too genuine disappearing act triggered compulsions that helped make his son the exquisitely accomplished mess he is. Racking up yet another in a long and remarkable series of roles exploring the tragedy of the quotidian dad, Francis Guinan allows the Father a pathos that enriches without excusing him.

Through it all there are the tricks, so elegantly designed by Jim Steinmeyer and artfully executed by Schneider. The audience's willing collusion is a crucial element of the partnership that makes magic work: in our way, we have to hope as hard as the practitioner. Everything about *The Magic Play* encourages an open-hearted engagement with its illusions, from the Magician's persona, with its delicate balance of reticence and charm, to the stagecraft that allows us to see the Diver as a kind of reverie, floating through the upward trajectory of his dive. (Full disclosure: the floating effect is partly achieved through aerial training contributed by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi of the Actors Gymnasium, which I'm delighted to say I cofounded.)

Uniquely, though, our engagement is guaranteed by that love story. Cirque du Soleil notwithstanding, genre fusions

are usually an awkward business, betraying every discipline involved. Not here. Hinderaker's dramatic narrative slides smoothly into the lore and practice of magic, each enhancing the other in ways that aren't just satisfying but slightly dangerous. An enormous house of cards sits stage right, uncomfortably, like a Chekhovian pistol, all during *The Magic Play's* 135-minute running time; its ultimate use neatly expresses the production's unity of forms.

One last bit of uniqueness: the fact that the relationship between the Magician and the Diver is gay and interracial is depicted without comment or plot significance. It simply is—which feels like progress and a reason for faith in the future. The casualness of the thing is carried through equally by Schneider and Sean Parris, whose Diver is distinct and substantial, despite having appeared to his lover as if by magic. v