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THEATRE

## Hit Play on Ramanujan

New York playwright and Berkeley theatre bring the story of India's ingenious Goddess-inspired mathematician to the stage

Special Review By Lisa Drostova, San Francisco, California

Eight decades after his death at age 32, mathematician Srinivasa Iyengar Ramanujan is still swathed in mystery. Virtually unheard of here, Ramanujan is one of India's legendary intellectual heroes, a brahmin who defied tradition to travel to England so that he could study at Cambridge at the invitation of G.H. Hardy, and a mathematical genius who ascribed his brilliance to a personal relationship with a Hindu Goddess. Stubborn and religious, Ramanujan (1887-1920) saw the divine in the dance of numbers; an acquaintance said of him that "every integer was his personal friend." During an illness in England, Hardy visited Ramanujan in the hospital. When Hardy remarked that he had taken taxi number 1729, a singularly unexceptional number, Ramanujan immediately responded that this number is actually quite remarkable: it is the smallest integer that can be represented in two ways by the sum of two cubes! One cubed plus twelve cubed equals 1729, as does nine cubed plus ten cubed.

Ramanujan's work has been used to help unravel knots as varied as polymer chemistry and cancer, yet how he arrived at his theorems is still unknown, unless one takes him at his word--as most Hindus would--about the Goddess. As Robert Kanigel writes in *The Man Who Knew Infinity*, "It is uncanny how often otherwise dogged rationalists have, over the years, turned to the language of the shaman and the priest to convey something of Ramanujan's gifts. Repeatedly, they have been reduced to inchoate expressions of wonder and awe in the face of his powers, have stumbled about, groping for words, in trying to convey the mystery of Ramanujan."

Consider Hardy's comment that one group of Ramanujan's theorems "defeated me completely; I had never seen anything in the least like them before. A single look at them is enough to show that they could only be written down by a mathematician of the highest class. They must be true, because if they were not true, no one would have the imagination to invent them."

It is such mystery--and the unlikely friendship between Ramanujan and his benefactor Hardy--that defines Ira Hauptman's new play "Partition," so-called after an area of math Ramanujan worked on. It was nimbly directed by Barbara Oliver in its world premiere from April 11 to May 18, 2003, at the upscale Aurora Theatre (<http://www.auroratheatre.org/>) in Berkeley, California. The author is working to bring the play to New York.

Witty, intelligent and surprisingly accessible to the math-challenged, "Partition" follows Ramanujan's pilgrimage to Trinity College, where Hardy taught. The two men could not have been more dissimilar. The naive, inexhaustible Ramanujan (Rahul Gupta) was an observant Hindu, adept at dream interpretation and astrology. His work was marked by bold leaps and gut feelings. Hardy, ten years Ramanujan's senior, was a stringent atheist who prized rationality and intellectual rigor above all. In one of the play's most telling moments Hardy explains that he's "trying to make [Ramanujan] a complete mathematician so he doesn't have to rely on anyone," a reference to the Goddess.

The line is indicative of Hardy's psyche. He was incredibly neurotic, refusing to look at himself in mirrors or be photographed. Contrary to biographical accounts of his good looks, Hardy (who never married) was convinced he was too horrible to look upon. David Arrow plays Hardy as an utterly convincing mass of tics and twitches; his portrayal suggests a man who can't get comfortable in his own skin. Hardy also couldn't talk about himself--the scene where he introduces himself to Ramanujan in the train station is hilarious ("I like cats, don't like dogs and fountain pens. God, this is the longest introduction I've ever given of myself."). Yet he blossomed on paper and in front of groups, drawing the admiration of readers and students alike. Most of the lectures Arrow delivers in the play are based on Hardy's real addresses to the London Mathematical Society, and their sleek passion stands in marked contrast to the distance he kept between himself and other people.

Where Hardy is chilly, classics professor Billington (a delightful Chris Ayles) is warm and welcoming, a good friend to both men. While in real life Hardy did have almost

daily contact with Ramanujan--there's evidence that he nursed the latter through an illness--in the play it's Billington who keeps tabs on Ramanujan's welfare. He's also a useful way for Hauptman to explain the math to the audience without being too obvious about it.

Although he managed to convince the atheist Hardy otherwise, Ramanujan was a devout man. Growing up, he had learned to worship Namagiri, consort of the Lion God Narasimha, Lord Vishnu's fourth incarnation. Unbeknownst to Hardy, Ramanujan believed that he existed to serve as Namagiri's champion. His grandmother had had a vision to that effect, and his mother believed it was through Namagiri's agency that she was finally able to get pregnant. In real life Ramanujan told people that Namagiri visited him in his dreams and wrote equations on his tongue; in the play She decides She doesn't have enough to do in India so She accompanies Ramanujan to Cambridge to keep an eye on him. Namagiri is silkily played by Rachel Rajput, who has a wonderful smoky voice with which to berate Ramanujan for not taking proper care of himself.

Namagiri's presence at Trinity College is one of Hauptman's fanciful touches. The other is Julian Lopez-Morillas as seventeenth-century French mathematician Pierre de Fermat, laughing a fabulous laugh and scratching out theorems. The time-displaced Fermat is a marvelous turn from Lopez-Morillas--he's big, arrogant and mischievous, spending his time dreaming up ways to frustrate his rival Descartes. Little does Fermat know that he's on a collision course with a certain dogged brahmin and his guardian Goddess Who personally tries to wrest from him the secret of his famous last unsolved theorem.

Of the liberties Hauptman takes, some are more successful than others. The cooking, equation-dealing Goddess and the lusty dead Frenchman work. Hardy's last speech before the London Mathematical Society after Ramanujan's death, however, is a stretch. Although Arrow does a fine job with it, Hauptman is working overtime to wrap things up neatly. It feels like the last scene in Shaw's "St. Joan" where Joan's ghost merrily asks her persecutors if they're going to "unburn" her. Neither Ramanujan nor Hardy need the apology; Hauptman's sharp dialogue and character development create a vivid portrait of the mysterious intersection of genius and faith without it.

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