

The Mathematics of Longing: more research needed

by Martin Buzacott in *The Australian*, 14 June 2018

Every journey begins with a single step, and in theatre that usually means finding a plot, closely followed by characterisation.

But Suzie Miller's new geek-drama *The Mathematics of Longing* has no time for such trivialities. It wheels straight on to science highway, heading west into the heartland of life, the universe and everything.

It starts with the cast of Kate Harman, Todd MacDonald, Ngoc Phan, Merlynn Tong and Gavin Webber all speaking simultaneously, completely garbled. The problem, good lighting by Ben Hughes and music from Ben Ely aside, is that things don't really improve from there.

While impossibly young-looking actors orate Wikipedia-style summaries on theoretical physics in the rapturous tones of Brian Cox contemplating the night sky, a playwright and a physicist enact domestic scenes whose banality makes *Home and Away* seem like Shakespeare.

They're not theatrical characters so much as pronouns, some sort of universal He and She with no backstories but who seem to be very emotional about what's going on right now.

To hazard a guess, this latest contribution to the modern genre of the science play, in which Nick Payne's *Constellations* is the yardstick, may be about the way in which personal relationships are reflective of a greater plan that can be explained in terms of maths and physics.

Certainly that would explain why grieving parents discuss Einstein's theory of relativity or why, in a strong contender for worst sex scene of the year, two couples get it on while ruminating on Newton's gravitational theory. Or was Newton the one in the domestic breakup scene?

No matter, it's all that science stuff, and everyone seems very intelligent, albeit a little dodgy emotionally, and perhaps too prone to interpretative dance. There's a rock star in there, too, who does a big build-up where we're waiting for him to cut loose on his axe while towering high above designer Ross Manning's three sets of potentially ankle-busting steps.

New plays by definition are a speculative venture and it's no discredit to fall flat on one's face in reaching for the stars.

But sometimes the best support a professional theatre company can offer to a playwright, even one with previous successes, is to say not yet.