

BREAKING THE CODE

Play by Hugh Whitmore, based on the book "Alan Turing: The Enigma" by Andrew Hodges

Review by Kitty Montgomery Former Lead Critic Kingston Daily Freeman
Produced by Performing Arts of Woodstock
Co-directed by Wallace Norman and Bette Siler
Performances November 6 – 24 2016

Jesus Christ and Alan Turing share a common bond in human history. Not to offend Christians or agnostic theoretical mathematicians and astrophysicists, but both heroes, in mortal flesh, deployed gifts of body and spirit for the salvation of mankind. Contributions of each were rewarded by the society of their time in accordance with popular fears and mores. The Romans crucified Christ as revolutionary terrorist. Turing was subject to hormone therapy by injection, as corrective punishment for violation of the British anti-homosexual code. The New Testament tells the story of Jesus. Andrew Hodges tells Turing's in Hodges book, *The Enigma*. This detailed biography relates the evolution of Turing's youthful prodigy, his profound friendship with an equally gifted peer, his far-reaching mathematical visions and crucial contribution to England's survival at the commencement of World War II. Enlisted by British intelligence, Turing broke the Nazi's U Boat code, preventing Germany from blockading the island and strangling the country to surrender.

The book additionally treats Turing's prosecution/persecution for a relationship with a pub acquaintance named John Smith. Turing's activities were considered a threat to national security, as well

as a violation of Britain's anti-homosexual code. Hugh Whitmore, in turn, wrote a play, *Breaking the Code*, that fleshes out Hodges' book with characters in changing time frames, who give three-dimensional illumination to the life of a man who lived in the fourth. A recent production of Whitmore's drama, presented by Performing Arts of Woodstock and co-directed by Wallace Norman and Bette Siler, extended for a three-weekend run.

The performances played locally, but resonate globally in terms of social issues absurdly, compassionately treated and the acting company's shared creation of transcendent, transformative theater. Norman, who lives the role of Turing incarnate, is joined by a collective of peers, whose characters surround the unsung war hero and avatar of artificial intelligence with an authenticity of being that allows the genius, irascibility, vulnerability and tenderness of the man to manifest as artless reality.

Over a decade, we have witnessed and written about actor/playwright/director Norman's work as founder of the Woodstock Fringe. Showcased at Woodstock's historic Byrdcliffe Theater. Presentations have included Jamaica Farewell, Lanford Wilson's *The Great Nebula in Orion* and

Women on Fire, which all traveled south to Off-Broadway venues. Additionally, Norman created and is an active participant in a year-round Woodstock Fringe affiliated playwriting project. Works evolved to production at summer series including his own prescient play, *It Can't Happen Here*, preceding the Sandyhook slaughter, and the drama/musical *Oh Virgil A Theatrical Portrait*, which depicts the acerbic, witty persona of critic/composer Virgil Thomson, presenting interludes from his operas and instrumental compositions. Possessed – you might say gifted – with the myriad hats of a Bartholomew Cubbins, Norman is also a singer. He studied at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts and was a former soloist at Carnegie Recital Hall. Woodstock Fringe audiences witnessed something of the cabaret art he shared as participant at the O'Neill Conference Cabaret Symposium, in a program he and soprano Watson Heinze celebrated among ten years of presentations for the Woodstock Fringe's Festival of Theatre and Song. This contemporary - classic series curated by Larry Allen Smith, featured composer/pianist Larry Bell, among other cutting edge classic contemporary musicians.

To clue in on Norman's truer than method-verismo immersion

as actor, witness his work as a director. A year ago, he and Siler, who plays Turing's mother Sara in *Breaking the Code*, rehearsed for a year to achieve her character Winnie's transparent joy as the desperate dune wife in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*. Never played for irony or comedy, her naive carpe diem optimism as she draws familiar possessions from a bag proximate to her imprisoning mound, which discoveries she will repeat all her days – moved us to tears, rather than laughter. In Whitmore's drama, the reconciliation these co-director/actors share as mother and son, after a lifetime of enmity and dissatisfaction strikes like a coup de foudre. It occurs after Turing "outs" himself to her, preceding the anticipated public scandal over his trial for homosexuality. She is shocked, revolted, never had a clue. His naked vulnerability and fear, however, trigger a traumatic recollection of her own. The anguish she experienced, abandoning him as a boy in the driveway of his boarding school, as she headed off to India with her husband. Reliving her impulse to leap out of the car, run back to him; grasp, protect him, her suffering is real, dissolving the protective shield the child Alan grew around his heart. Their embrace, realizing lost love, found, encompasses the house.

The other woman in Turing's life is Pat Greene played by the transcendent Deborah Vines. A mathematician and part of the code breaking team, Pat is assigned as his assistant on the Enigma project. She comes to love him, awed by a Mozartian brilliance of mind she, alone, at the agency, is able to fly with, and for an innocent beatitude within the man. Whitmore flashes a glimpse

of Turing's theoretical flights via a lecture he gives at his former school. Commencing with "the brain is a pudding" he ascends from there in an illumination of his vision of a machine that thinks, that's lucid and thrilling in concept, and, incidentally awesome for any actor to animate. Vine's compassionate woman, who will leave genius behind – hers and Turing's – to marry – meets him again after his trial and the injections that cause him the humiliation of developing breasts. Her love remains abiding, unconditional, an agape wound of bereavement.

Then there are the guys from British intelligence, Ron Miller – Wil Anderson – and Dwillin Knox – Ric Siler. Think kind and perfidious "handlers" from a John Le Carré novel. Farrell Reynolds plays detective Mick Ross, an avuncular the letter of the law Irish cop, who, meaning no harm, leads the unsung national hero, Turing, to national disgrace. For plot convenience, Whitmore reduces the John Smith character to a straight-out working-class hustler. Hodges' bio suggests Smith had his own genius, thwarted by circumstance, and was genuinely touched that a man of Turing's stature took an interest in him.) Actor John Remington gives an edgy, wired performance that suggests Smith's multi-faceted sensitivity, anyhow.

An angel, hovering above and beyond all, is the love of Turing's life, Christopher Morcom, who died when they were young students. Mathematicians sharing a soaring compatibility of theoretical brilliance, the shocking, sudden loss of this prince of grace – Craig Newman appears as the living Christopher in the first scene – marks Turing for all his days. He transmutes grief to inspiration,

working to create a "machine that thinks", in hopes of communicating with Christopher's spirit. Unsung, unknown as a war hero for decades, Turing was finally recognized as the "father" of the modern computer. In our time, he's the visionary who foresaw artificial intelligence. And bitcoin?

In the final scene, when Turing sits at a table, apple in hand, beside a saucer of cyanide, – the legend of Snow White's poisoned apple was a lifelong fascination for him, Norman makes us feel his dip and bite is an act of courageous curiosity, not fear or despair. Turing is sky diving up, confronting a solution to the ultimate enigma. And maybe, the thought is unarticulated, without projected sentiment, maybe he will wake after "the big sleep" and Christopher will be there.

Norman's multiple theatrical gifts – those "hats" – are fused to a single crown in this complex compassionate portrait. What he and his cast convey in this production is not a polemic tragedy about a hero persecuted for homosexuality. It is a fundamental revelation of a gifted immortal's humanity. Take this show on the road, with Norman as "the man" and it will serve as conversion therapy for a nation.