

Theater review: San Jose Rep's 'Secret Order'

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

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Researchers Alice Curiton (Kathryn Tkel) and William Shumway (James Wagner) with lab head Robert Brock (Robert Krakovski) in "Secret Order."



Secret Order: Drama. By Bob Clyman. Directed by Chris Smith. Through Nov. 7. [San Jose Repertory Theatre](#), 101 Paseo de [San Antonio](#), San Jose. Two hours, 10 minutes. \$17.50-\$74. (408) 367-7255. www.sjrep.com.

The stakes couldn't be higher. William Shumway, the earnest, naive scientist in Bob Clyman's "Secret Order," may have discovered a cure for cancer. That's right. Not just a new treatment but an actual cure.

The focus of the drama that opened Wednesday at San Jose Repertory Theatre is less intriguing, however. Clyman's biomedical-based thriller is more of an old-fashioned morality tale about how greed, ambition and corporate office politics corrupt high ideals to the detriment of us all. The setup, that the corporation is a high-profile research facility and what's at risk is a cancer cure, is almost peripheral to the fairly simplistic ethical drama onstage.

Director Chris Smith gives it about as vital a production as it could wish, energized by the high-tech gloss of the cellular, schematic and landscape projections that wash over the walls of David Lee Cuthbert's inventive set. The actors invest the tale with personality and conviction. But the more keyed-up the emotions get - with melodramatic mood music to boot - the more run-of-the-mill the story seems.

The opening scene almost proclaims that this is another product of the Ensemble Studio [Theatre](#)/Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Science & Technology Project - a well-intentioned effort to encourage the writing of more plays about scientific subjects. The result is usually a moderately well-made drama awkwardly tied to a science theme, as when James Wagner's appealingly bashful Shumway opens by announcing his cancer research breakthrough in the unlikely setting of an undergraduate lecture series.

The explanation about cell division and malignancy is clear and animated, on a verbal cartoon level. Shumway's research ties in with actual efforts in gene-splicing to make cancer cells attack themselves. In Robert Krakovski's human hurricane of a wheeler-dealer lab director, Robert Brock, Clyman sets up a potentially fruitful clash between ethics and career advancement that becomes the main focus of the play.

Brock lures Shumway to his prestigious New York center and sets him up with funding, facilities and dreams of a [Nobel Prize](#). Kathryn Tkel's unconsciously sexy undergraduate nerd Alice Curiton, a mile-a-minute talker,

pushes her way in as Shumway's assistant. Meanwhile, Brock is engaged in a power struggle with the old toxicology chief, Saul Roth, played by Julian López-Morillas with avuncular wiliness.

Clyman charts the slippery slope of ethical compromises by interesting but schematic degrees. He also compromises reality in the process, with articles accepted by prestigious journals and pharmaceutical deals negotiated without any vetting. Magnetic performances keep the action engaging, at least until the overwrought climax, but the story strains credulity.

On the other hand, what with the potential for fame, fortune and a fetching lab assistant, "Order" might just achieve the Sloan objective of attracting more students to science.

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