

Review: 'Secret Order' at the San Jose Rep

By [Charlie McCollum](#)

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Biomedical research may not seem the most likely of settings for high drama. But it has proved, in real life, to be a world of flawed humans, challenged ethics and clashing egos as well as a battleground for war between the purity of science and corporate greed.

In his "Secret Order" -- now at the San Jose Rep -- playwright Bob Clyman mines the material to create a taut, crisp and appealingly cynical drama that explores moral ambiguity, the strengths and limits of loyalty and corruption of innocence. It has some flaws, but his ability to present big ideas wrapped in entertaining dialogue makes for a good night of theater.

Clyman's work -- which has been making the rounds of top regional theaters for a decade but is only now receiving its Bay Area debut -- is set largely at a prestigious New York research facility, overseen by the hard-edged Robert Brock (Robert Krakovski) who, after twice narrowly missing the Nobel Prize for his cancer research, has largely given up actual scientific work for corporate power.

When an obscure young cancer researcher from the Midwest named William Shumway (James Wagner) submits a paper suggesting he has made a major breakthrough, Brock pounces -- seeing the opportunity to bring not only prestige and billions of dollars to his institution but also to re-establish himself in the scientific world. In the play's very funny opening scenes, Brock recruits Shumway with a sales pitch that manages to be both seductive and condescending.

"I see you're at Illinois," says Brock at one point. "Lots of bright people there, I'm sure. Then there's New York."

When he arrives, Shumway is very much the purist, driven solely by the scientific pursuit of a cancer cure. "I've always thought science was more of revelation," he says in an almost reverential way.

Thrown into this mix are Alice Curiton (Kathryn Tkel), a brash college student who comes to work at the lab, and Saul Roth (Julian López-Morillas), an older but still crafty scientist whose role at the institute is diminished by Brock to funnel more funds to Shumway's work.

Shumway's work with R cells and DNA strands does hold promise. (It's a measure of Clyman's skill with dialogue that he makes this intelligible even for those whose only knowledge of DNA is last week's episode of "CSI.") But the actual breakthrough proves frustratingly elusive, with cancer beating back Shumway's every attempt at the final solution.

The problem is that Brock is already selling the goods, pitching the research to major pharmaceutical companies and engineering the premature publication of Shumway's work in the New England Journal of Medicine. (In one of Clyman's occasional missteps, he ignores the fact that the Journal doesn't really throw research into print with only a couple of days of peer review -- although its precautions haven't always kept out flawed or fabricated work.)

As the pressure mounts to deliver on all that promise, Shumway finds himself acting with the same kind of duplicity as Brock. With no small push from Roth, things quickly unravel, lives are ruined, and the play ends on a note that suggests, despite all that has happened, things in the world of biomedical research will never change.

Director Chris Smith -- the former artistic director of San Francisco's Magic Theatre -- brings just the right snappy pacing to "Secret Order" while never letting things rush by too quickly. (The show clocks in at around two hours.) And he stages

the movement nicely, with the help of David Lee Cuthbert's multimedia set design and Pamila Gray's lighting and works well with a cast that clearly enjoys biting into Clyman's rapid-fire dialogue.

Krakovski brings nuance to the role of the unscrupulous and powerful Brock, never letting him turn into a cardboard villain. Wagner projects the conflict within Shumway with clarity and skill.

In the role of Alice Curiton, Tkel is saddled with the most problematical part, since Alice is more often a plot device than a fully realized character, but the actress brings sass and energy to the role. And López-Morillas, a veteran Bay Area scene-stealer, proves just as deft onstage and as his character is in the world of corporate politics.

In the end, "Secret Order" may not have quite the dramatic punch or depth of such similar "science" plays as Michael Frayn's "Copenhagen" (nuclear research) and David Auburn's "Proof" (mathematics). But it has wit and insight, and -- in the hands of Smith and his cast -- it works as a cautionary tale of the cancerous effects of fame, ego and money.

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'Secret Order'

By Bob Clyman

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

Through: Nov. 7

Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes (with one intermission)

Tickets: \$35-\$74, [www.](http://www.sjrep.com)

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