

Theater Review: ‘Secret Order’ a question of ethics at SJ Rep

Dynamic and flashy, the Rep’s production even conveys a sense of Matrix-like cutting edge.

by [Clinton Stark](#)

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Secret Order



San Jose Repertory Theatre

Directed by Chris Smith

Starring Robert Krakovski, Julian López-Morillas, Kathryn Tkel, James Wagner

On the Web: www.sjrep.com

In review

In *Secret Order*, a biomedical thriller now playing at the San Jose Rep, it’s hard to tell when (or if) a line has been crossed. All four characters are so caught up in their pursuit of achievement at all costs that noble causes such as discovering the cure for cancer test not just scientific acumen, but also moral conviction. Grey is the new white.

Dynamic and flashy, the Rep’s production even conveys a sense of Matrix-like cutting edge. A large projection system and backdrop is used to take us inside a laboratory, an office high-rise, an auditorium, and later a serene park. Director Chris Smith makes effective use of the art-deco uni-stage, maintaining a fast-paced tempo thanks to the minimal need for set changes; sliding risers to the left and right are occasionally used to zip in a compact lab or a small office with desk and chair.



James Wagner and Kathryn Tkel in the Regional Premiere of the biomedical thriller *Secret Order* at San Jose Repertory Theatre. Photo: Kevin Berne

The story itself is intriguing. Young hot-shot scientist William Shumway (James Wagner) thinks he’s discovered the cure for cancer. Involving R-cells, there is actually a significant amount of depth to the explanation of how they can multiply (“Like China but with no one in charge.”) and attack cancer cells. At least, in theory. Robert Block (Robert Krakovski) agrees to fund the project, and is anxious for global recognition. A fresh out of school assistant (Kathryn Tkel) comes on board to help in the lab. Meanwhile the mysterious Saul Roth (Julian López Morillas in a strong, layered performance) plays puppeteer.

The race for a cure — “just one more month!” — eventually heats up and leads to a short cut here and there. Soon enough a full-blown cover-up ensues as publishing and conference deadlines loom. But who said what, and who knew what? And, critically, when?

It’s only a bribe if you don’t deserve it.

As the operation begins to unravel, real character is tested. Suddenly, jobs are at stake, and the the chase for a cure seems less important, at least momentarily.



James Wagner in the Regional Premiere of the biomedical thriller *Secret Order* at San Jose Repertory Theatre. Photo: Kevin Berne

I was interested to see how science would fare on stage, as a central story idea. Written by Bob Clyman, a clinical psychologist, the play is certainly smart, the dialog mostly authentic. But the cerebral nature of the material occasionally leads to emotional detachment. Key scenes that should be riveting with intense pay-offs, come across flat. Disappointing too is the lack of chemistry between James Wagner and Kathryn Tkel. Their romantic connection feels hollow and less than convincing. That's unfortunate as it's needed to off-set the cool motif concerning lab-coats, beakers and laptops.

The real star here is the set design and lighting. Kudos to David Lee Cuthbert and Pamila Z. Gray for an exciting presentation, that's quite unlike anything I've seen recently (although *As You Like It* last season also used dramatic projection). Especially clever is the way the backdrop aligns with frame cutouts to create effects such as shelves, or windows, or computer screens. Lighting is equally impressive and helps to break the uni-stage into several smaller spaces.

Secret Order is an intelligent, fast-paced production. It's not perfect theater — it lacks emotional ebbs and flows, and the script reaches high, but often falls short in an effort to capture such broad political and social themes — but thankfully brings some fresh ideas and perspectives to the stage.

Secret Order

San Jose Repertory Theatre

3 out of 5 stars

By Robert Clyman

Directed by Chris Smith

Starring Robert Krakovski, Julian López-Morillas, Kathryn Tkel, James Wagner

Through November 7, 2010

www.sjrep.com



(l to r) Robert Krakovski, James Wagner and Julian Lopez-Morillas in the Regional Premiere of the biomedical thriller *Secret Order* at San Jose Repertory Theatre.