Things have moved very fast for David Auburn since his play *Proof* first opened in May 2000. Not only did it transfer successfully to Broadway but Auburn also picked up a number of prestigious awards including the Pulitzer Prize. Since then *Proof* has been widely performed - including in Australia, with separately mounted productions in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney, as well as the State Theatre Company version here in Adelaide.

In New York, film and TV actor Mary-Louise Parker played the lead role of Catherine, setting the precedent for other name players being cast. In the Melbourne Theatre Company’s excellent production last year, director Simon Phillips selected Rachel Griffiths for the task and, for the Sydney Theatre Company, Jacqueline McKenzie did the honours.

Director Catherine Fitzgerald has taken a different tack with her production for State Theatre, preferring to cast younger actors closer to the mid-to-later twenties ages of the characters. Amber McMahon, a young performer who has also made a name for herself on the comedy circuit, plays Catherine and Nathaniel Davison takes the part of Harold Dobbs.

Set just outside Chicago, *Proof* is about two sisters, Catherine and Claire, and their father Robert, a mathematics professor. It is Catherine’s twenty fifth birthday and her father has died the previous week. A graduate student, Harold Dobbs is visiting the house going through Robert’s notebooks in search of publishable material. Among the brightest of his generation, Robert has been afflicted with mental illness since his twenties and his later work has been obsessional and often nonsensical. Except for one proof - a mathematical theorem about prime numbers - which Hal Dobbs, his protégé, recognises as a major breakthrough. Robert is all set for posthumous glory when Catherine announces - to the disbelief of Hal and her sister - that she herself is author of the proof.
Auburn’s play, rather like Michael Frayn’s *Copenhagen* and Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia*, has as its subject the brainy world of maths and physics. But unlike Frayn and Stoppard, who make thematic links between the science and the philosophical preoccupations of their characters, Auburn uses mathematics as a kind of intellectual decoration. *Like A Brilliant Mind*, Ron Howard’s film about the schizophrenic mathematician John Nash, *Proof* is a romantic account of genius touched by madness. Bearing in mind that she has dropped out of college to care for her sick father, Catherine’s prowess is akin to magic. She is Miranda turned sorcerer after browsing Prospero’s books. She is the Buffy of prime numbers. And the real proof - and test - of the play is the more sentimental one of love and trust. It is whether Hal, her suitor as well as her rival, will believe that Catherine really is the Maths Princess.

With her use of a young and sympathetic cast Catherine Fitzgerald has very much favoured a gentle reading of the text. Amber McMahon is excellent as Catherine, understated and wry in her dealings with both father and sister and playful in her interaction with Hal. The shadow of mental illness that has touched her (and threatens to worsen as she reaches the same age as her father in crisis) does not extend far upon her. Nor is she as cranky and disturbed as some actors, including Rachel Griffiths, have played the role. These are legitimate choices for Fitzgerald and for McMahon but they subdue the play and remove much of the doubt we might have that Catherine has written the proof.

As Hal, Nathaniel Davison is amiably comic and captures much of the enthusiasm and single-mindedness of a young grad student. His scenes with McMahon are appealing and well-paced and, with assured accents, they capture the liveliness of Auburn’s Chicagoan vernacular. Caroline Mignone astutely ensures that sister Claire is not the frumpy stereotype she could easily become. This is especially important because Claire, paying all the family bills with her job as a Wall Street analyst, offers important evidence - indeed proof - about Catherine’s state of mind and credibility. As Robert, David Kendall negotiates the task of being both father and ghost and, on opening night, dealt suavely with an obstinate champagne cork. His scenes with McMahon are touching and in his Lear-like extremity, half clothed on the verandah on a winter’s night, we glimpse the reality of the disability that Auburn’s text usually only hints at.
This production is a pleasing and accessible one, with a stylish set from Mary Moore and an intriguingly symmetrical score by Stuart Day. It also showcases some very capable Adelaide actors. But for those who may have had a previous acquaintance with the play it also highlights that David Auburn’s text is stronger in its narrative suspense than in the depth and implication of its characterisation. The proof of Auburn’s pudding may be in the eating, but it seems to taste best on the first sampling.