

THAT IS ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

Lowry Studio Theatre, May 2013

A Manchester friend's daughter came home from school recently, telling how she had found she was the only one in her GCSE class who had heard of Alan Turing. *That is all you Need To Know* is an engrossing, carefully researched play about Turing and Bletchley Park, alternately moving, informative, and poignantly funny. But for mathematicians, it comes with a health warning: Here (related through the eyes of Bletchley mathematician Gordon Welchman) Turing's visionary mathematics, a mental world the size of the Albert Hall, is neatly packaged TARDIS-like into a modestly proportioned 'Alan'. As hugely talented theatre company Idle Motion describe in their programme:

"... in 2011 we learnt of Alan Turing and were inspired to read about his life and work. He led us to Bletchley Park and the realisation that what happened there was bigger than one mathematician's genius, but was part of the collective memory of thousands of remarkable people whose quiet work changed the course of our history."

This marvelously creative recreation of wartime Bletchley Park is not so much about the "Alan Who?", still with us 101 years after Turing's birth. It is a dramatically sparky, and not undemanding, reminder of how much we owe to British geekiness, eccentricity - and mathematics. There is nothing much about the key role of Bayesian statistics or mathematical logic in the breaking of the Enigma code; but the Bletchley Park story, buried for decades, is brought beautifully to life. And the crucial role played by the earlier work of Polish mathematicians Marian Rejewski, Jerzy Różycki and Henryk Zygalski is duly credited. I was worried that those who were new to the history would be thoroughly confused by the accumulation of information, vividly dramatised for those in the know via cryptically inventive dramatic devices - images of wartime Bletchley Park projected onto opening filing cabinet drawers; voices-over from the (mainly women) who lived on to tell of the intensity of life at the secret decrypting centre; and clever cutting back and forth

between the 1940s, and the 1990s campaign to keep the precious heritage from the developers. There were passing references to a mysterious 'Tony' and his Colossus rebuild, a nice nod in the direction of key figure Tony Sale, who sadly died just last year. At the Metro station near the Lowry Studio Theatre, I got the chance to ask a bright-eyed 14-year-old son of one of the Manchester mathematicians at the play what he made of it - I shouldn't have worried, he was full of enthusiasm, very much alive to the hidden world, hinted at by Idle Motion with such creativeness and clear affection.



Oh, and the actors were jolly good! Chris Bone's performance as Alan is an intensely committed one. As a mathematician, my own favourite performance was Sophie Cullen as the aspergerish Joy, the play's latter-day standard-bearer for Turing amongst the neuro-typicals. You should of course go and see this talented company if you get the chance. The current Turing inspired mini-glut of productions dealing with mathematicians cannot last. This - along with *The Universal Machine*, recently playing at the New Diorama Theatre in London - is a very good addition to the list. And we cannot be that surprised if the mathematics is kept concealed in "Alan Who's" capacious mental TARDIS. Those stimulated by the play can enter and explore that through one of the many centennial books still appearing. And, of course, one can visit (or revisit) Bletchley Park itself.

For further dates see: www.idlemotion.co.uk/Tour_dates.html or catch it in August at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe from 2 to 24 August 2013.

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