

The Hawthorne Players have achieved a landmark success with their current staging of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. It is the company's most technically sophisticated production as well as one of the best performed.

The play was adapted by Simon Stephens from the novel by Mark Haddon. The central character is Christopher Boone, the 15-year-old boy who experiences the incident mentioned in the title. He discovers the carcass of Wellington, his neighbor's dog, which had been pierced through with a garden fork. When the policeman looking into the case touches Christopher, he hits the officer and is arrested. At the police station, Christopher receives a caution, which means he'll be in serious trouble if he repeats the offense.

Christopher's father, Ed, pleads with the boy not to fixate on Wellington's death, but Christopher becomes obsessed with learning what happened to the dog. The solution to the mystery upends the lives of Christopher and his parents.

It is clear from the start that Christopher is not neurotypical. Much of his behavior suggests he is on the autism spectrum, but the script never says he is autistic. The play is about understanding how Christopher perceives the world and not about labeling him.

To create a sense of what might be going on in Christopher's mind at moments of stress, the Hawthorne staging employs high intensity video, lighting and haze effects, and loud sounds including white noise. Much of the technical wizardry would not have been possible before the recent upgrades to the newly renamed Florissant Performing Arts Center (formerly the Florissant Civic Center Theatre).

The highest praise must go to projection designer Ken Clark, lighting designer Eric Wennlund, and sound designer and mixer Jacob Baxley. Their work simulates the sensory overload Christopher experiences when he travels alone from Swindon to London by rail and the underground. The striking effects make it clear what an extraordinary accomplishment it is for the hypersensitive Christopher to make this journey with only strangers to help him.

Projections play a crucial role throughout the show. There are hundreds of video cues. Their functions include conveying Christopher's enthusiasm for mathematic and astronomy and adding helpful specifics about the setting. The combination of Clark's video and his flexible set design facilitate very fast scene changes that leave no doubt about where the action is taking place.

The clarity of the action is a tribute to the deep commitment and understanding brought to this project by director Ken Clark. It was clearly a labor of love.

Clark chose a splendid cast. Dan Wolfe makes it clear from the start that Christopher is neurodivergent and vividly portrays the extremes in his responses to the world. Mike DePope and Jennelle Gilreath Owens give deeply affecting performances as parents who must cope with the frustration of not being able to express their deep love for their son in the ways that are most natural to them.

Natalee Damron captures the kindness and concern of Christopher's teacher, Siobhan. The excellent ensemble includes Jessica Kelly, Jeff Kargus, Hunter Fredrick, Patrick Brueggen, Elle Harlow, and Marian Holtz.

The performers' persuasive accents were coached by Robert Ashton and Gwynneth Rausch. Stefanie Kluba's choreography and Jean Heckmann costumes maintain the production's high standards.

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* continues through November 13 at the [Florissant Performing Arts Center](#), One James J. Eagan Drive.

—Gerry Kowarsky