David Auburn was born in Chicago, Illinois on November 30, 1969 and studied political philosophy at the University of Chicago. His writing career began when he joined a comedy troupe as an extracurricular activity and began contributing sketches to the group’s repertoire. Auburn graduated in 1991 and was offered a writing fellowship by Amblin Productions, a Los Angeles-based company owned by filmmaker Steven Spielberg. Auburn took the opportunity and moved to Los Angeles to perfect his craft. After the fellowship ended, he moved on to New York, where he attended the Julliard School’s playwriting program. He began to write plays in earnest and had several of them produced by small New York theaters throughout the following years.

History of “Proof”

“Proof” was originally produced by the Manhattan Theatre Club on May 23, 2000, and directed by Daniel J. Sullivan. The principal actors were Mary-Louise Parker as Catherine, Larry Bryggmann as Robert, Ben Shenkman as Hal, and Johanna Day as Claire. In October of that same year, the play appeared on Broadway at the Walter Kerr Theater, where it ran through 2003, with a total of 917 performances. The original cast performed the play through 2001; after that year, actresses Jennifer Jason Leigh and Anne Heche both took turns in the role of Catherine, while Josh Hamilton and Neil Patrick Harris both appeared as Hal.

Since its first production, “Proof” has been performed multiple times by various theater groups. Auburn adapted the play for the screen and it was made into a movie in 2005 starring Gwyneth Paltrow, Anthony Hopkins, and Jake Gyllenhaal.

Information for this section was compiled from the following sources:
http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=12546
http://www.goldfishpublishers.com/proof_WKT.html
http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-proofauburn/hist.html

Mary-Louise Parker

Mary-Louise Parker, the woman who first starred as Catherine in the original 2000 run of “Proof,” was born August 2, 1964 in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. She did many off-Broadway shows in the 1980s and made her first Broadway appearance in “Prelude to a Kiss” in 1990. At this time she won the Theatre World Award, Clarence Derwent Award, and a Tony nomination. Her performance in “Proof” won her a Tony Award for best performance by a leading actress in a play in 2001.

Aside from her active theater career, Parker has also made appearances in movies and on television. She received an Emmy in 2002 for her performance in “The West Wing.” She has also
received a Golden Globe for her roles in “Angels in America” and “Weeds;” she is currently still appearing in “Weeds,” playing the part of Nancy.

Information for this section was compiled from the following sources:
http://whoz.com/ask/marylouiseparker.html
http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000571/bio

“Proof’s” Awards

In 2001, a year after its debut on Broadway, “Proof” was awarded the following: the Drama Desk Award for Best New Play, the Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Play, the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Best Play, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and the Tony Award for Best Play.

The Pulitzer Prize
The Pulitzer Prize was first awarded on June 4, 1917. This most well-known of literary awards was established by Joseph Pulitzer, born in Mako, Hungary on April 10, 1847. Pulitzer was the son of a wealthy grain merchant and was educated in private schools by tutors. He became a newspaper journalist at the age of 25, and died in 1911.

Joseph Pulitzer specified and made financial allowances for four awards in his name, spanning the fields of journalism, letters and drama, education, and traveling scholarships. In 1917, the Pulitzer Prize Board increased the number of awards given to 21 and added poetry, music, and photography. Award winners receive a cash prize and great critical acclaim.

The Tony Award
The Tony Award recognizes achievements in American theater. It was first presented on April 6, 1947, and was named in honor of Antoinette Perry, an actress, director, producer, and wartime leader. This prestigious award is presented by the American Theatre Wing and is decided by a panel of about 700 judges. Although it was founded in 1947, the first medallion was not given out until three years later at the awards ceremony in 1949.

The New York Critics’ Circle Award
The New York Critics’ Circle Award was created in 1935 by the Algonquin Hotel. It is the second oldest theatre award and is awarded every year to the best new play of the season. The Circle Award was originally decided by nine critics from daily newspapers and magazines. It is now decided by 21 major theater critics drawn from throughout New York.

The Drama Desk Award
The Drama Desk Award was created in 1955 and is given to plays that are produced on Broadway, off Broadway, and in other non-profit theatres. This award is designed to recognize plays that appear in various theater realms, in contrast to other awards that focus solely on Broadway productions. The Drama Desk Award has helped launch the careers of major stars and playwrights. Some off Broadway productions, including “Driving Miss Daisy” and “Steel Magnolias,” have achieved worldwide success as a result of receiving this award.
The Lucille Lortel Award

The Lucille Lortel Award was created in 1985 and was named for Lucille Lortel, an actress and theatre producer. She was born on December 16, 1900 and studied acting and theatre at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. She started her career and Broadway debut in 1925 in the play “Caesar and Cleopatra” at the Theatre Guild. In 1947 she founded the White Barn Theatre in an old barn on her property in Westport, Connecticut. Lortel received many awards throughout her life and died on April 4, 1999 at the age of 98. This award was designed in her memory and honors off-Broadway productions.

Information for this section was compiled from the following sources:
http://www.pulitzer.org/biography
http://www.pulitzer.org/historyofprizes
http://www.mahalo.com/Tony_Awards
http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Fall98/Brake/3main.htm
http://www.dramacritics.org/dc_history.html
http://www.lortel.org/IIf_awards/index.cfm?page=history
http://www.dramadesk.com/history.html

Central Themes and Conflicts of “Proof”

Mental Illness

The type of mental illness suffered by Robert is not made clear in the script. The audience learns that it involved a disconnection with reality and perhaps a type of psychosis. We might be tempted to label his mental illness as a form of schizophrenia, particularly if we are familiar with the life of John Forbes Nash, the mathematician whose life inspired the film “A Beautiful Mind.” However, this is undefined by Auburn and should also be left undefined by the actors and audience.

The question as to whether Robert’s mental illness was connected to his mathematical genius is also left unanswered, although we are told that by the age of 25 (the same birthday Catherine is celebrating when the play begins), Robert had completed all of the work he would complete in his field, and perhaps felt useless as his mental capacity deteriorated.

Heredity

Catherine is in a vulnerable position. Considering her own level of skill in mathematics, her age of 25, and the general confusion of her life after the death of her father, she is uncertain whether she too will succumb to the same type of mental illness. The question of how much Catherine has inherited from Robert is central to the play: did she or Robert write the groundbreaking mathematical proof which Hal discovers? Will she follow in her father’s footsteps and succumb to mental illness? Has her life passed her by and is it too late for her at age 25? The tension is heightened by the confusion and emotional volatility that takes place in a situation such as that following the death of a family member. Catherine’s mood swings, sarcasm, and high intelligence are simultaneously character traits, responses to her father’s death, and possible warning signs for her future.

Family

The relationship between Catherine and her father Robert is an intricate one. Catherine has essentially withdrawn from society to be his sole caretaker. There was, no doubt, a great deal of love between them, particularly since the two obviously had many things in common; however, her love for
him, and her sorrow when he passes, are laced with resentment and confusion at the direction her own life has now taken.

The contrast between the sisters Catherine and Claire is another example of family conflict. Claire, who wants to take Catherine back to New York with her, believes that her sister may be mentally ill. It’s an ironic touch; Catherine is the sister who stayed at home to care for their ailing father, and yet Claire is attempting to step into the caretaker role at this late date with her suspicions about Catherine’s mental health. The balance of power between the two sisters is a delicate one, and we are witnessing their interaction at a volatile time in their lives. One senses, however, that the sisters are more alike than they realize; both of them are attempting to confront feelings they have long neglected, albeit in very different ways.

Information for this section was compiled from the following sources:
http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/usplays/auburnd1.htm
http://www.delawareonline.com/article/20081021/LIFE/810210302
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0377107/
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june01/auburn_04-20.html

Character Analysis

Catherine

Catherine is 25 years old. She gave up college to care for her father during his mental illness, and after his death, she is left in a sort of limbo where she is not prepared to deal with the world outside. She has a certain social awkwardness and tends to be gruff, short, and sarcastic, although not mean spirited; one senses that her discomfort in dealing with others drives her to say many things she would not otherwise say. It is clear that she has not interacted with the world much over the past nine years.

Catherine’s life, however, has not been solely devoted to her father. She has been keeping herself mentally active over the years by studying mathematics in her free time, and this has drawn her closer to her father as well as increased the fear of those around her that she may suffer from his same mental illness as he did. Her brilliance in mathematics is a pleasure for Catherine. This is why it is all the more striking to her when Hal questions the authorship of the proof. Catherine’s interactions with Hal are particularly complex because, in spite of herself, Catherine opens up emotionally to Hal. She is therefore especially vulnerable to him.

Catherine is not unlikable, in spite of her lack of social graces; in fact, she is written as quirky and extremely endearing. Her sense of humor and novel behavior traits walk the line between funny and heartbreaking.

Claire

Claire is Catherine’s sister, who has arrived from New York upon the death of Robert. Breezy and business-like, Claire may be hiding many of the same lost, confused feelings her sister Catherine is experiencing, but it’s difficult to tell. Claire has a good job in New York and has been paying her father’s health care bills. One of the major conflicts between her and Catherine is the fact that Claire believes Robert should have been put into an institution, which Catherine was strongly set against.
While she can come across as somewhat cold and shallow, the truth about Claire lies deeper than that; she is not necessarily envious of her sister’s greater intelligence, but she is afraid of it. In Claire’s world, institutions are the answer to mental illness because they put things “in their place” and keep things running in a predictable manner. She seems to have a great fear of volatile, unpredictable situations, and both Robert and Catherine represent that for her with their bright minds and (possible) mental instability. Claire is out of touch with the real emotional dynamics of the family; it is easier for her to write off both Catherine and Robert as mentally ill and to continue signing the checks than it is for her to deal with the situation in a hands-on manner and attempt to understand it. What is certain is that Claire, in her own way, cares very much about her sister Catherine’s well-being.

**Hal**

Walking the line between awkward and well meaning, and blundering and invasive, 28 year-old Hal is a former student of Robert’s. His lack of social grace, while different from Catherine’s, does in fact bring them closer together; both are devotees of her father’s brilliant mind. Hal is a mathematician but not a great one; he admires Robert’s accomplishments with a sort of hero worship, and reasonably assumes that Robert wrote the proof.

Hal’s motivations throughout his relationship with Catherine are somewhat in question. It seems that he is using Catherine, to a certain extent, in order to access her father’s notes; however, it’s not clear if he is doing this in a devious way or if he is just clueless as to the insensitivity of his behavior. Most readers tend to see him in the “clueless” light; Hal is simply too nerdy and too disingenuous to be acting in a pre-planned manner. His actions are often insensitive and he stampedes into Catherine’s life at a vulnerable time, but he is, nonetheless, helping her to unlock her brain and her life from the patterns they have followed for the past nine years, which may explain why Catherine warms to him as much as she does.

Information for this section was compiled from the following sources:
- http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/usplays/auburnd1.htm
- http://litsum.com/proof/

---

**A Note on Staging**

The action in “Proof” takes place on a single set, which represents the back porch of Catherine and Robert’s house in Chicago. The deteriorating porch, with a dim glimpse of the house inside, effectively “grounds” the play, and this effect is encouraged by the fact that no more than two actors are on the stage at the same time. A sense of personal connection and intensity thus develops throughout the scenes, often in spite of what is taking place; the characters are revealing themselves to the audience even while remaining anchored in a limited area. The set intentionally illustrates the life Catherine has led for the past nine years. Like the audience, she has been confined to a small space but has stretched her mind in various new directions that may not have been possible in a more active, distracting environment.

Information for this section was compiled from the following sources: