A star is born in 19-year-old Iain Kohn, whose breakout stage debut as on-the-spectrum amateur detective Christopher Boone is just one reason why Greenway Arts Alliance’s production of Simon Stephens’ The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time ought to top any L.A. theatergoer’s must-see list.

Fiction fans know Christopher as the fifteen-year-old hero of a 2003 Mark Haddon novel that, like Simon Stephens’s 2013 London stage adaptation, introduces us to the budding young Swindon mathematician without putting a name on “behavioral difficulties” that include an insistence on set routines, the inability to judge nonverbal cues, seeming emotional coldness, tantrums when touched, and a tendency to prattle on about a single subject, in Christopher’s case the murder-by-garden-fork of neighborhood dog Wellington, whose death our young hero sets out, in true Sherlock Holmes fashion, to unravel.
Playwright Stephens not only manages to include just about every colorful character and unexpected plot twist in Haddon’s novel (written as Christopher’s first-person journal), in a stroke of inspiration, he turns it into the play Christopher has written about his investigation odyssey, one in which Christopher, his school mentor Siobhan (Kacie Rogers), his father Ed (Michael Yurchak), and his mother Judy (Joanna Strapp) portray themselves.

A half-dozen Swindonians bring to vivid life the multitude of characters Christopher encounters on his journey, including the neighbors he interviews for clues, the police officers who become involved in his investigation, and the strangers he must rely on as he leaves the familiarity of home.

The Curious Incident’s original West End production, one that crossed the pond to Broadway and later toured the U.S., featured a production design made up almost entirely of what appeared to at first glance to be plain white boxes (though appearances proved deceiving).

At L.A.’s Greenway Court Theatre, an inspired Kate Jopson sets Christopher’s opus in Christopher’s special ed classroom, utilizing only classroom paraphernalia to tell his tale.

A simple string of red yarn serves multiple purposes. Hung on the wall in the shape of a dog, it stands in for murdered pooch Wellington. Later, it becomes (among other transformations) an EKG readout, the path Christopher must
follow as he sallies forth towards London, the angular shapes of a geometry problem, and the best possible gift a boy could hope for.

An overhead projector plays a major role as well, revealing the contents of Christopher’s pockets, the states of Christopher’s mind, a ticking stopwatch, and more.

Add to that the myriad ways director Jopson and an indefatigable sextet of “Voices” make ingenious use of chairs, poster boards, classroom toys, etc., and you not only have a production whose design makes absolute sense, it doesn’t have to rely on high-tech, high-budget LED projections to give us glimpses into Christopher’s mind and the sensory overload he experiences at various moments of his journey towards the truth.

A supremely confident Kohn brings his own life experiences as a teenager with Asberger’s (now studying at Cal State Northridge) to one of the year’s most dazzling, commanding, utterly endearing star turns, with Rogers’ deeply caring, warmly nurturing Siobhan, Yurchak’s salt-of-the-earth but patience-tested Ed, and Strapp’s maternal tiger of a Judy providing dynamic support throughout.

As for Trista Cunningham, Darius De La Cruz, Denise Moses, Robert Paterno, William Salyers, and Selina Scott-Bennin, rarely has an ensemble done more spectacular multitasking than this one while never once leaving the stage.
Scenic designer JR Bruce and prop master Andrea Fiorentini have transformed a thrust-reconfigured Greenway Court into the most wonder-concealing of classrooms, lighting designer Azra King-Abadi and sound designer Jesse Manadpat join forces to equally powerful effect, and Danae Iris McQueen not only gives the play’s four lead characters just-right outfits, costume accessories permit cast members to switch identities in hardly more than an instant.

Last but not least, dialect coach Scott-Bennin merits her own snaps for the cast’s authentic-sounding assortment of UK accents.

Victoria Hoffman is casting director. Understudy Josh Golombek plays Christopher at specially scheduled student matinees. Abe Martel takes over for De La Cruz beginning November 22. Alexandra Hellquist is swing.

Tiffany Moon is producing director. Amanda Eno is production stage manager and Elizabeth Eichler is assistant stage manager. Elizabeth Schueltze is assistant director. Rene O. Parras, Jr. is technical director. Jo Ann Mendelson is fight director.

Taking audiences on the most thrilling, harrowing, and rewarding of adventures, The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time is sure to be remembered as one of the year’s most extraordinary made-in-L.A. productions.
Greenway Court Theatre, 544 N. Fairfax Blvd., Los Angeles.
www.greenwaycourttheatre.org

– Steven Stanley
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Photos: Philicia Endelman

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