



Brian Hendon (left) and Jackson Davis play Israeli psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman in the new Marsh play. (Photo/David Allen)

'Two Minds' explores intense friendship of Israeli geniuses

Patricia Corrigan
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Two Israeli psychologists with Bay Area connections broke new ground in both psychology and economics, but it was the arc of their professional collaboration and friendship that attracted San Francisco playwright Lynne Kaufman.

"Two Minds," Kaufman's latest play, explores the lives and work of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, whose research on how people make decisions won Kahneman a Nobel Prize and Tversky a MacArthur Fellowship, also known as a genius grant. The play opens May 4 at The Marsh in San Francisco.

"It's about a friendship and shared work, a personal rift that develops when their work moves in different directions and then the struggle to come back together," Kaufman said. "It's also a very Jewish play, because of the way the two men joke and banter."

Kahneman, now 84, and Tversky, who died in 1996, developed the Prospect Theory, which describes how people use intuition to make choices that involve risk or uncertainty. "We think we are logical thinkers, but we're not. We all have hidden biases," Kaufman said. "Kahneman and Tversky looked at quick thinking, which is based on intuition and experience and leads to a fast evaluation, and also at slower, more logical thinking. We need both."

The early life experiences of the two men were reflected in their characters, Kaufman said. "Tversky was all about seizing the day. He had the confidence, the physical daring and sense of belonging of an Israeli," she said. "Kahneman spent

World War II hiding from the Nazis in France with his family, and he was more thoughtful."

Kahneman earned his doctorate in psychology at UC Berkeley. Both men were fellows at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University in the academic year 1977-1978. Tversky joined the faculty at Stanford in 1978 and spent the rest of his career there.

Kaufman learned about the Prospect Theory from Kahneman's 2011 book, "Thinking, Fast and Slow," and about the personal aspects of the psychologists' collaboration from Michael Lewis' book "The Undoing Project: A Friendship That Changed Our Minds."

Some 20 of Kaufman's full-length plays have been produced, including "Acid Test: The Many Incarnations of Ram Dass." Her work has won the Glickman Award for best new play, the Kennedy Center's Fund for New American Plays Award and the Neil Simon Festival New Play Award.

In "Two Minds," actors Brian Herndon and Jackson Davis play the psychologists. Robert Kelley, founding artistic director of TheatreWorks Silicon Valley, directs.

"As a playwright, I am interested in Jewish intellectual life and in those who want to make a contribution to the world. I also am interested in the humanity of Kahneman and Tversky, and in their journeys," Kaufman said.

"Plus, I always like to go to a play and learn something." ■

"Two Minds," through June 9 at The Marsh, 1062 Valencia St., S.F. \$20-\$100. themarsh.org/two_minds/lynn-kaufman