

Review: San Jose Rep's 'Splitting Infinity' is a blast

By Karen D'Souza

Mercury News

Article Launched: 10/19/2008 12:00:00 AM PDT

Faith and science collide in "Splitting Infinity."

A gleaming observatory-inspired set of orbs and steel (designed by Robin Sanford Roberts) instantly defines the world of the play. This is a temple to science where it's the playwright who works in mysterious ways. Jaime Pachino plots a romance where faith, science and time are the key variables. It's that love story that ignites the mind as well as the heart. In this West Coast premiere, smartly directed by Kirsten Brandt, it's also one of the most stimulating plays San Jose Rep has tackled in recent memory.

This universe spins around the brainy, brassy and beautiful Leigh (Amy Resnick), a megastar in the field of astrophysics. It's a blast watching Resnick light up the stage like a supernova. One of the finest actors in the Bay Area, she makes the text burn brightly indeed. She finds the heat and light at the core of scientific inquiry, the lust for knowledge that drives discovery.

We meet Leigh as she turns 49, stares mortality in the face and wonders where she goes from here. Does she rekindle with an old beau, the solid rabbi Saul (Robert Yacho), or does she spark with the sheepish-cute grad student Robbie (Chad Deverman), who's half her age?

One thing is certain, she can't go back, even though her thoughts often run to the past, to the time when she was 22. The young Leigh (a radiant Christine Sage Behrens) is the one who had the guts and genius to turn her field on its head.

She also had the gumption to shoot down the love of her life, then rabbinical student Saul (Kevin Dedes), out of sheer idealism. That was before she knew just how much gravitational pull a single choice can exert on your life.

The playwright leaps back and forth in time as we watch Leigh embark on her greatest adventure yet: to disprove the existence of God with cold hard data. While the scenes between the younger incarnations of Leigh and Saul don't cut as deeply as those between the older versions, there are no false notes here. A stellar cast grounds the philosophical issues in real human emotions and that constant friction makes the production as moving as it is clever.

Pachino's laser-sharp wit also gives the play an endearing comic chutzpah. A joke about Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and a homage to Yiddish stand-up exist side by side.

But the nucleus of the play remains the war of ideas. Leigh is deeply wounded in the battle between faith and science when Robbie is critically injured in a car accident and

his devoutly religious mother (Cindy Goldfield) decides against medical care. She puts all her trust in fate.

The tragedy forces Leigh to confront the randomness of life and why we desperately seek meaning in an ambivalent universe. There are no finite answers, of course. It's Pachino's fearlessness about embracing ambiguity that makes "Splitting Infinity" such a big bang.

Contact Karen D'Souza at kdsouza@mercurynews.com or (408) 271-3772. Check out her theater reviews, feature stories and blog at www.mercurynews.com/kdsouza.

"Splitting Infinity"

By Jaime Pachino

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio in San Jose

Through: Nov. 9

Running time: Just over two hours (one intermission)

Tickets: \$26-\$47

Call: (408) 367-7255,

www.sjrep.com