

The Idiolect

The language or speech pattern of one individual at a particular period of life

“Light” Could Be Brighter

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THEATER REVIEW: SAN JOSE

Show #30: [Legacy of Light](#), San Jose Repertory Theatre, March 30.



Kathryn Tkell, Mike Ryan and Carrie Paff in *Legacy of Light*. Photo by Kevin Berne.

Marie Curie notwithstanding, the contributions of women to the field of science is an oft-neglected topic, so it's generally a good thing when something like the 2009 movie *Agora* or Karen Zacarias's play from that same year, *Legacy of Light*, comes along to set the record straight about great female scientists of history.

Legacy of Light goes back and forth between a modern-day astrophysicist named Olivia and the great 18th-century scientist Émilie du Châtelet, who advanced our understanding of what energy is by amending Isaac Newton's formulation that energy is an object's mass multiplied by velocity to say energy is actually mass times velocity squared—which became the scientific standard until Albert Einstein came along and substituted the speed of light for velocity. Times being what they were, her writings were initially published under the name of the philosopher and playwright Voltaire, who was her lover and partner (although she was married to a very understanding marquis).

Press materials for San Jose Repertory Theatre's West Coast premiere say the play won the American Theatre Critics Association Award for "Best New Play" last year, but that's not quite true. [Bill Cain's *Equivocation*](#) actually won the 2010 Harold and Mimi Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award, but *Legacy of Light* and [Donald Margulies's *Time Stands Still*](#) got additional citations and cash prizes as runners-up.

Director Kristen Brandt gives the 140-minute play a pleasant, stylish staging at San Jose Rep, but even so it takes some time to really get going. And unlike other similarly time-crossed plays, the contemporary scenes turn out to be much more vibrant than the period ones.

It seems like it's off to a promising start when Robert Yacko's swaggering Voltaire catches Rachel Harker's bright Émilie canoodling with Miles Gaston Villanueva's dim pretty-boy nobleman Saint-Lambert. "Imagine what your husband would say about this, madame!" the jealous lover chides before indulging in a bit of swordplay with the "pantsless young pup." (I should perhaps clarify that I mean with actual swords, choreographed by Dave Maier, not some bawdy euphemism.)

The 18th-century scenes don't sparkle the way they ought to with all these sharp-witted people and swordplay and whatnot. That's partly due to a lack of energy in Brandt's staging and something missing in the performances to take them from generally pleasant to truly dynamic, but a lot of it comes down to Zacarias's script indicating wit without being all that witty itself.

The energy level amps up considerably when we get to Carrie Paff's endearingly nerdy Olivia, who comes home early from work giddy that she may have finally found the first evidence of an embryonic planet in the process of being born. She's decided she wants to have a baby, despite the fact that she has late-stage ovarian cancer and can't bear the child herself. Her husband Peter (an amiable Mike Ryan) is a grade school teacher, but we're not so concerned with that because it doesn't have much to do with science, and this is a matrilineal play. Kathryn Tkel is energetic and a few notches louder than anyone else as Millie, the spunky young woman who offers to be their surrogate mother for reasons of her own. As the pregnancy progresses, Olivia starts to worry that maybe she's just not the maternal type.

There's a lot of direct address, some from Olivia making presentations to unseen groups of people, and some from Voltaire and Émilie talking to us as the audience because they're dead and have nothing better to do. These bits aren't the strongest parts of the play, although it's enjoyable when Olivia gives a speech to a girl scout troop to show them that girls can be scientists too. (My sister is a scientist, so I particularly appreciated that.)

Because of the 1700s geniuses' timestream tourism, Harker and Yacko are the only two actors who don't show up in the other time period as someone or other. Tkel is giddy and sympathetic as Émilie's daughter Pauline, and Ryan has a fun cameo as the long-absent marquis. Villanueva is a bit hard to fathom as Millie's high-strung and emotionally stunted brother Louis, but part of the problem there is that he's an ill-developed character as written. Paff also appears briefly as a wet nurse when Émilie gets pregnant at 42 at great risk to her life, leading to a flurry of activity as she tries to preserve her legacy by doing as much work as she possibly can in case she doesn't survive childbirth.

It's a swell-looking production. Brandon Barón's period costumes are handsome, and William Bloodgood's sparse and ever-changing set suggests stars in the background and recurring images of apples, because of the famous story of Newton and the apple that Voltaire supposedly made up.

The main problem with *Legacy of Light* is that the play is not nearly as bright as the people in it. This is felt especially in the breathless speeches that start off saying something actually interesting about science and then meander off into mawkish speculation about whether love and light share the same properties. We're also really hit over the head with Émilie's repeated refrain that "All is for the best in this best of all possible worlds," which would play such a large role in Voltaire's savage satire *Candide*, and the implication that his masterpiece was spurred by bitterness over a lost love seems disappointingly simplistic.

The show only really picks up once characters from the different time periods start to cross over and meet each other, which happens very late in the show and isn't much of a surprise but is a lot of fun simply because Voltaire and Émilie are so amused and bemused by the goings-on around them. Yacko's Voltaire in particular only really becomes likeable at that point, around the two-hour mark. It's not quite enough to make me glad I trekked down to San Jose on a weeknight, but that bit toward the end is a blast.

Legacy of Light runs through April 17 at San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose.
<http://sjrep.com>

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