

Legacy of Light = Moving + Mirth, Squared

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By Jeanie K. Smith

A brilliant new work by Karen Zacarías, *Legacy of Light*, currently in its West Coast premiere run at San Jose Repertory Theatre, is smart, funny, and touching. Mingling science with history and the distaff view, Zacarías gives us much to think about - women's place in science, the fate of female scientists who become mothers, the arts in relation to science, and more - but ultimately engages our hearts with the universal need for loving and being loved.

"Everything is for the best, in this best of all possible worlds."

This saying, familiar from Voltaire's *Candide*, becomes a leitmotif in the play, and we learn that it comes from the Marquise Émilie du Châtelet, 18th century scientist, mathematician, wife, mother and Voltaire's long-time lover. Du Châtelet (Rachel Harker) led a remarkable life and is credited with making a significant correction to Newton's theory of energy. That most of us have never heard of her is only a small part of the play's message. The saying captures her indomitable spirit and enthusiasm, her unwavering optimism even when things look bleak. Another optimist and female scientist, the fictional Olivia (Carrie Paff), also struggles to juggle the demands of her passion for her work and her personal life, showing us a more contemporary version of du Châtelet.

The play toggles back and forth between present day and past, and sometimes the two eras bleed together in amusing and illuminating ways, as we follow each woman's passion - passions for science, yes, but also for art, and for motherhood. At the problematic age of 42, du Châtelet discovers she's pregnant and predicts that she will die in childbirth. Voltaire (Robert Yacko) and the Marquis (Mike Ryan) support and reassure her, but she is propelled into finishing her life's work, racing against time to prove her theory and earn her place in science.

At the same time, Olivia, having made the discovery of her career and fully intent on pursuing and proving it, is also distracted by pregnancy - not her own, but the surrogate one in a young woman hired by Olivia and her husband Peter (also Ryan). Millie (Kathryn Tkel) wants to be a surrogate in order to earn big bucks to support her own dream of a career in fashion arts, but the money may have to be spent on more practical family matters first. The conflicting choices for the women are clear, but the men also have to deal with their own conflicts - between home and career, art and politics, personal and public spheres. As each character navigates their desires and the demands for their time, fate is also taking its toll, intervening with unforeseeable obstacles. At critical points one is sure that this will all end badly; but the surprising twists keep coming, with fresh insights and deeper delvings into the capacity of the human heart.

Harker is superb as du Châtelet: regal, assured, unflappable. She and Yacko (as Voltaire) have great chemistry and enjoyment in their scenes together.

Yacko is terrific in the larger-than-life role, capturing both the ego and the heart of a great poet. Tkel, as both Millie and du Châtelet's first child, Pauline, at first seems brash and abrasive, but one realizes this is character-driven, and she softens, enlisting our sympathies as the play progresses. Miles Gaston Villanueva plays both her brother Lewis and the poet/lover of du Châtelet, managing to deliver very different characters, both of whom we like to dislike. Paff's



Kathryn Tkel, Rachel Harker and Carrie Paff in *Legacy of Light*.
Photo by Kevin Berne

seamless performance as Olivia gives us small glimpses into her heart at first, then flings the doors open by the end, thoroughly snaring us in the process. And Ryan is excellent in his double roles; his apple-tree scene is both heart-breaking and hilarious.

Legacy of Light is one play you shouldn't miss. Timely, moving, thought-provoking and laugh-out-loud funny, it will stay with you long after you leave the theatre.

Legacy of Light continues until April 17 at San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. Tickets, call (408) 367-7255 or at sjrep.com.