

'Legacy of Light' review: Tug of history, science

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

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Millie (Kathryn Tkel, left) is comforted by Olivia (Carrie Paff) in "Legacy of Light." Photo: Kevin Berne.



Legacy of Light: Drama. By Karen Zacarías. Directed by Kirsten Brandt. Through April 17. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. Two hours, 20 minutes. \$35-\$74. (408) 367-7255. www.sjrep.com.

History and science mix with fiction and maternity as 18th century France intersects with 21st century New Jersey in Karen Zacarías' intriguing "Legacy of Light." The effect is often exciting, even if a bit too much wishful thinking infects the West Coast premiere that opened Wednesday at San Jose Repertory Theatre.

That flaw doesn't show up until late in the action, and may not bother those who like their intellectual stimulation leavened with sentiment. Much of "Legacy" generates genuine appeal as it interweaves the stories of two female scientists facing motherhood in their 40s - in the 1740s and today - with some graceful enlightenment about physics in the Enlightenment and after.

The story lines smoothly intersect on William Bloodgood's handsome, spare set in Kirsten Brandt's fluid stagings. The first tells of Émilie du Châtelet (Rachel Harker), the longtime companion of Voltaire (Robert Yacko) who translated Newton's works into French and made key discoveries in the properties of light and energy that paved the way for Einstein.

Meanwhile, in contemporary New Jersey, Olivia (Carrie Paff), a top astrophysicist at the Isaac Newton Institute and an ovarian cancer survivor, is over the moon about her possible discovery of a planet in the process of being born. She's almost as excited about the idea that she and her kindergarten teacher husband Peter (a buoyant Mike Ryan) can have a baby with a surrogate mother.

The opening scene is oddly flat, given that it contains some hot sex for Émilie and swordplay between Voltaire and the last of her (historic) many lovers, the poet Saint-Lambert (Miles Gaston Villanueva). Paff and Ryan inject some refreshing energy as the focus turns to today, and Kathryn Tkel jolts it into high gear with the arrival of Millie, the smart, determined, young potential surrogate.

The action becomes more engrossing from there, as Émilie hastens to finish a last major work, fearing that, at 42, she won't survive an unexpected pregnancy. As Millie's and her bellies expand, and Émilie and Olivia excitedly lecture about physics, the three women become the play's pulsating center with the men orbiting them like planets.

Paff and Tkel propel the tale, with Harker and Yacko growing more solid in their roles and Ryan adding key support as both scientists' husbands. It isn't as heady as Tom Stoppard's "Arcadia," which the structure inevitably recalls. Some of

the science and literary history (about "Candide") is a little didactic or simplistic and the ending is as overtly contrived as it is touching.

But there's as much pleasure as nutrition in most of the play's food for thought. When Olivia meets Voltaire and Zacarías starts mixing up her time frames, the "Legacy" of du Châtelet's light shines pretty bright.

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