

## San Jose Rep: 'Legacy of Light'

Motherhood, science and the great existential unknown all play a role in Karen Zacarias' play, running through April 17.

by [Sean Conwell](#) on Apr 04, 2011



Émilie du Châtelet (Rachel Harker, left) enjoys the company of her lover, Saint-Lambert (Miles Gaston Villanueva), in 'Legacy of Light.' [\(video\)](#)

Motherhood, science, women's rights and the great existential unknown all play a role in Karen Zacarias' *Legacy of Light*, which premiered on the West Coast Wednesday night at San Jose Rep. Kirsten Brandt directs this intelligent and charming comedy, which parallels the lives of two female scientists—an 18th-century historical figure and her fictional, current-day counterpart—as they probe the mysteries of the universe and deal with becoming mothers.

The historical figure is pioneering physicist Émilie du Châtelet (played by the irresistible Rachel Harker), mistress of Enlightenment thinker Voltaire (a dashing but appropriately cerebral Robert Yacko) and a formidable intellect in her own right. After learning that she is pregnant with the child of another lover, the poet Saint-Lambert (Miles Gaston Villanueva), she races to complete her studies on the nature of light, building upon the ideas of Isaac Newton. Childbirth in the 18th century was dangerous enough for young women, and the 42-year-old Émilie knows that she may not survive the ordeal.

Meanwhile, modern astrophysicist Olivia (Carrie Paff) has discovered what she believes to be a new planet in formation. This "baby" planet inspires her to have her own human baby, and since she and her husband, Peter (Mike Ryan), cannot conceive, they hire the slightly eccentric Millie (Kathryn Tkel) as a surrogate mother. As Millie struggles with the pregnancy, Olivia struggles to balance her research with preparation for the upcoming child.

Olivia's world is less romantic than Émilie's but is more accepting of women in science and less dangerous for expecting mothers. In the end, however, the emotions surrounding both motherhood and science are just as profound in the modern age as in the Age of Enlightenment. The characters eventually discover this for themselves when the laws of nature are suspended, allowing Voltaire and Émilie to meet their spiritual descendents in the 21st century and resulting in some of the evening's funniest and most touching scenes.

The apple is an oft-recurring image in the play's imaginative visual presentation, and Voltaire's account of the inspiration for Newton's theory of gravity seems to strike at the core of *Legacy of Light*: the falling apple that gave birth to a great idea, as a mother gives birth to a child.

### **Legacy of Light**

Runs through April 17

San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

Tickets \$35–\$74 [Get Tickets and More Info on Legacy of Light at the San Jose Rep](#)