

## Review: A witty 'Legacy of Light' at San Jose Rep

By Karen D'Souza

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Science and lust collide with explosive results in "Legacy of Light."

Karen Zacarias' witty new play fuses physics, philosophy and the rules of attraction in a time-traveling romp in the manner of Tom Stoppard. The action volleys back and forth between the 18th century and today, while the motifs bounce around from Newton and Voltaire to the politics of biology.

Agilely directed by Kirsten Brandt in its West Coast premiere at San Jose Rep, "Light" is a sweetly giddy look at life and love and the gut-wrenching choices women are forced to make, then and now. While the playwright overreaches her grasp a bit and she never achieves the seamless alchemy of, say, Stoppard's "Arcadia," it's still a charmingly brainy and poignant adventure through time and space.

Two fiercely intelligent women scientists lead oddly parallel lives here. Though separated by centuries, both are obsessed with the chaos that always swirls around the act of creation.

The glamorous Émilie du Châtelet (Rachel Harker) gets pregnant by a lover at 42, a precarious age for childbirth in the 1700s. She is already considered a rare bird in her day as she has an "eccentricity" for physics. Now she fears she will perish giving her baby life, so she rushes to achieve the scientific breakthrough to which she has dedicated her life. She is fueled by a need to understand the nature of light, the force that gives heat and energy to our universe.

Meanwhile in the 21st century, the driven astrophysicist Olivia (Carrie Paff) is pushing 40. Unable to conceive a baby, she hires a surrogate, a fiercely quirky young woman named Millie (the incandescent Kathryn Tkel), to make her dream of motherhood come true.

Ironically, Émilie (who is based on a real historical figure of the same name) has a far more rollicking sex life than her modern counterpart. Clad in ringlets, diamonds and other period finery (apt costumes by Brandon Barón), she dallies with the studly courtier Saint-Lambert (Miles Gaston Villaneuva) and bewitches the philosopher Voltaire (a wonderfully deadpan Robert Yacko), while still inspiring loyalty in her husband the marquis (Mike Ryan).

Olivia, on the other hand, leads a bit of a humdrum existence with her cuddly hubby Peter (also played by Ryan). They shop at Whole Foods and dress like Old Navy ads. They are such nice, placid types that they are shocked when Millie's protective brother Lewis (Villaneuva again) takes umbrage at their arrangement with his sister. He doesn't believe people should give away babies for money.



Legacy of Light 5: (l to r) Émilie du Châtelet (Rachel Harker) reveals to Voltaire (Robert Yacko) that she is pregnant in San Jose Rep's West Coast premiere of Legacy of Light. Photo by Kevin Berne. (Kevin Berne Images 2010)

The real fire in Olivia's life comes from her science. She has discovered what seems to be a planet in the making and the prospect makes her head spin.

While skipping back and forth, Zacarias cleverly suggests that change can be deceptive. Both women have to grapple with rigid social expectations that demand perfection. Both struggle over what their role should be and what legacy they will leave behind. Giving birth to ideas may mean just as much to them as giving birth to babies.

The playwright also captures the relativity of all the characters without sacrificing spark and spontaneity. It's an impressive feat, as is her illumination of the history of women in science. And her central theme about the conservation of energy ("Everything changes, but nothing is lost") has real resonance.

However, the play doesn't quite pull off some of its leaps in tone. The 18th-century scenes never feel as real as the modern ones, a lot of the elaborate ripostes fall flat and the constant intersection of past and present feels awkward.

Still, the cast nimbly skips through the play's gymnastics, from double-casting to double entendres. They ground the nonstop mash-up of cutting-edge science and Enlightenment ideals with sincere performances and spry comic timing.

Harker, who recently played her Ladyship in "The Dresser" at the Rep, gives the play its most moving moments as Émilie realizes how much she is willing to sacrifice to grasp at immortality. The actress brings subtlety and restraint to scenes that might seem overly sentimental.

For her part, Paff, who shone in "Collapse" at the Aurora recently, finds the poetry in physics. She lights Olivia's densely woven scientific rants with a sense of the wonder of invention. In her hands, the mysteries of dark matter seem as juicy as the apples that figure so prominently in William Bloodgood's sly scenic design.

Brandt's directorial savvy also helps play down some of the sticky segues in the text. She gracefully juggles all of the play's disparate elements while never losing sight of the emotional gravity at its core.

This "Light" is at its most touching when it cuts through all of the intellectual acrobatics to speak to the heart.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Check out her theater reviews, features and blog at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza).

'Legacy of Light'

By Karen Zacarias

Through: April 17

Where: San Jose Rep, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

Running time: 2 hours 15 minutes (one intermission)

Tickets: \$21-\$57; 408-367-7255, [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com)