

## Theater Review: 'Legacy of Light' a contemporary spin on women and science at SJ Rep

"No problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking."

by [Clinton Stark](#)

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### Legacy of Light



San Jose Repertory Theatre

Directed by Kristen Brandt

Starring Rachel Harker, Carrie Paff, Mike Ryan, Kathryn Tkel, Miles Gaston Villanueva, Robert Yacko

By Karen Zacarias

March 24 - April 17, 2011

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*She Blinded Me With Science...* and I want more.

If Karen Zacarias' new play *Legacy of Light* is any indication of where play writing is headed then pop the champagne, we have a lot to celebrate. Here is a work that pulls off the seemingly impossible: it turns a science history lesson into a first-rate bit of entertainment for the stage. The fact that the story revolves around two head-strong, driven women is icing on the cake considering the subject matter is surely under-covered in today's meme-chasing, pop-centric culture.

Émilie du Châtelet (Rachel Harker) made history (although it took a decade after her death for her work to be truly recognized) when she challenged and then expanded upon Einstein's concepts of mass and velocity. The story takes us back to the age of Enlightenment where we learn the difficulties facing a woman trying to achieve in a world dominated by men. Her lover Voltaire (Robert Yacko), the 18th century French philosopher and writer alternatively lends a supporting hand and teases with sly wit, even if it means turning a blind eye to her follies with the much younger Saint-Lambert (Miles Gaston Villanueva).



Émilie du Châtelet (Rachel Harker) spends time with her lover, Saint-Lambert (Miles Gaston Villanueva)

But there is much more to this story.

*"Perspective will shift, light will shine, and you will see the way."*

Soon enough we end up in ... New Jersey!

An elementary school teacher (Mike Ryan) and his hard-charging, planet-discovering wife Olivia (Carrie Paff) decide to hire a 21 year-old surrogate mother Millie (Kathryn Tkel), whose brother does not approve: "There are three laws of the universe: pay your taxes, wear your seatbelt, and keep your kin."

Quick tip: If you're about to deliver really bad news, first preface the conversation with a Nobel prize-worthy scientific breakthrough — like the discovery of a planet. Try it next time you total the car.

The play interweaves the lives and events from those of Émilie's lust-charged 18th century France with Olivia's present day yearning for career and motherhood. What follows is a genuine examination of human nature. What motivates us to make certain decisions? Can a modern woman define herself beyond motherhood?

*"No problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking."*

Cause and effect play a central role in outcomes — as do apples. Although Olivia is guided by rational thought, and by the outcomes of her mathematics, a dollop of emotion combined with a mid-life crisis threatens to discombobulate her universe.

All the performers are equity, and it shows. I last saw Rachel Harker in *The Dresser*, and, once again, she is outstanding. There is a royal yet approachable quality to her performance that is glowing class. Robert Yacko delivers an effortless, cheeky turn as the outlandish Voltaire. Miles Gaston Villanueva has come a long way. I last saw him in *Sonya Flew* where he was decent if slightly stiff. Not so here. He's got the chops to match the looks now, and he's top-notch. Same with Carrie Paff who carries her intellect and passion in this role like a younger Meryl Streep. I'd like to see Kathryn Tkel, however, use some restraint- her vocal dial doesn't always need to be set to 10 (although it was effective in trying to coax Paff out of a tree in an entertaining second act scene).

I dare say the set reminded me of the Berkeley Rep. It's squared and bathed in beautiful, multi-layered lighting (David Lee Cuthbert). Projection is used to striking effect from time to time without overwhelming the actors, and there is an Architectural Digest meets French Nobility aesthetic that is rich and satisfying. I noticed at intermission the drinks, as at Berkeley, are also named — cosmic tea, for example— after elements of the production. It's an enjoyable tie-in.

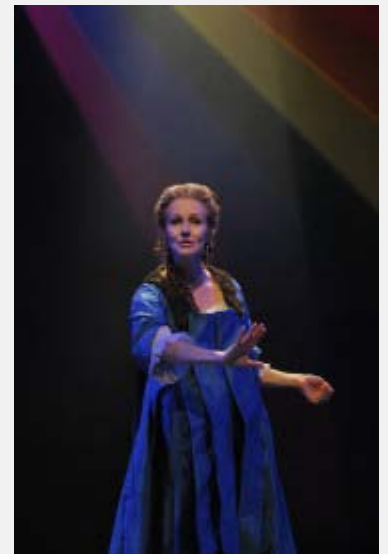
But the biggest star here is Karen Zacarias whose writing makes this West Coast premiere highly memorable. Never before have I jotted down so many quotes during a show. "These are equations, not moral judgments." – "Being reasonable is for the living." – "There are no voids." – "It's a miracle! ... It's science!" – "I look at you and I feel immortal."

She has crafted something special here with *Legacy of Light* (as much as I don't like the name). This play is contemporary yet respects its antecedents without treading into melodrama or the preachy.

In the end, Zacarias heeds us to "always do something that matters." With *Legacy of Light*, she is leading by example. Let's hope others follow.



Olivia (Carrie Paff) throws herself into her work when she discovers the possible formation of a new planet.



Émilie du Châtelet (Rachel Harker) races to complete her controversial research on light.

### **Legacy of Light**

4.5 out of 5 stars

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