
MEDIA COLUMN

Media Column Editors: Sarah Greenwald, Appalachian State University, greenwaldsj@appstate.edu and Alice Silverberg, University of California, Irvine, asilverb@math.uci.edu

Review of the play **Emilie—La Marquise Du Châtelet Defends Her Life at the Petit Théâtre at Cirey Tonight**

Reviewer: Alice Silverberg, University of California, Irvine

I first learned about the French Enlightenment intellectual Emilie du Châtelet from the 1974 book *Women in Mathematics* by Lynn M. Osen [1], which inspired me when I was an undergraduate in much the same way that others were inspired by E. T. Bell's *Men of Mathematics*.

By chance, just before the end of its run, I learned that South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, CA was presenting the World Premiere of a play about the life of du Châtelet.

The play, by 27-year-old playwright Lauren Gunderson, had been commissioned by South Coast Repertory. I managed to catch the last show, on May 10.

I liked it very much. I thought that it was well-acted. The set design was interesting, with a clever chalkboard (see the photos and video at [2]). But what I liked most was the unapologetic way in which it put a woman and her passion for science front and center.

Gunderson's website [3] points out that her own work combines "science, feminism, and history onstage," and this showed clearly in *Emilie*. The play was true to what I've read about the life and spirit of du Châtelet.

It was a life lived fully. What came across clearly in the play were du Châtelet's passion for science and passion for life. The play concentrates on a very productive time in du Châtelet's life, when she and the writer Voltaire lived at her husband's country estate, the Château de Cirey [4].

The relationship between du Châtelet and Voltaire at various times was love affair, friendship, intellectual dueling, and scientific competition, such as when they each submitted entries on the nature of fire to a French Academy of Sciences competition (won by Leonhard Euler, but both their entries were also published), or argued about the merits of the ideas of Gottfried Leibniz versus those of Isaac Newton. The play also touches on spirited public disputes between du Châtelet and her critics.

At the end of du Châtelet's life, she worked very hard to finish her translation of and commentary on Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, in anticipation of the death that she feared would be likely in that era due to being pregnant at the late age of 42.

While du Châtelet's life had its ups and downs, she was fortunate to live in a time when being a member of the French aristocracy had its perks. When du Châtelet died in 1749 about a week after easily giving birth to her fourth child (Voltaire claims the baby was immediately placed on a geometry book), three of the distraught companions near her bedside included her husband, her devoted friend/colleague/ex-lover Voltaire, and her lover and the father of the child, Jean-François de Saint-Lambert.

While a topic of the play is the balance and tension between "Love" and "Philosophy" in du Châtelet's life, the play itself manages to maintain a reasonable balance in dealing with both scientific passion and love life. The tension between two strong personalities trying to deal with each other as both lovers and colleagues will be familiar to many readers of this *Newsletter*. What the viewer takes away will vary from person to person. The play's message could be summed up with Emilie's

line "Nothing gives me meaning but me," and that asking questions is what keeps us going.

Scientists in the audience will be confused by the depiction of the *force vive* controversy, which was presented as a debate over whether $F=mv^2$ or $F=mv$. This is puzzling to anyone who remembers $F=ma$; even the units don't seem to work out. It would have been helpful to know that the F here is really kinetic energy (and there is an analogy with $E=mc^2$).

Mathematicians will also cringe at the attempts to poeticize mathematical ideas, with "the squaring of hearts" and the idea that squaring something makes it alive (though as pointed out in Gunderson's notes on her script, this may be justified by Newton's own words on the subject, and the flowery prose of the period).

The source Gunderson cites in the program is Judith P. Zinsser's recent du Châtelet biography [5], but she clearly also used other sources. A great deal has been written about du Châtelet, including a recent lively biography by David Bodanis [6]. Coincidentally, another commissioned play about du Châtelet, *Legacy of Light* by playwright Karen Zacarias, had its premiere at roughly the same time, in Arlington, Virginia. I'm pleased to see the current interest in women of science.

After seeing the play at South Coast Repertory, I went back to Osen's book [1] and was surprised to learn that she had been closely affiliated with my current university. I spent an afternoon at UCI's Special Collections and Archives where Osen's papers are stored. About her book *Women in Mathematics* she wrote to friends, "Do read the chapter on Emilie du Châtelet whose name you will encounter frequently, and whose life I would have been quite happy to lead" and "of all the women I've written about, she is the most intriguing, a real swinging broad who could teach us all something about how to lead our lives."

References

- [1] Lynn M. Osen, *Women in Mathematics*, The MIT Press, 1974.
- [2] South Coast Repertory's Emilie website: www.scr.org/calendar/view.aspx?id=1897
- [3] Lauren Gunderson's website: www.laurengunderson.com
- [4] Château de Cirey website: www.visitvoltaire.com
- [5] Judith P. Zinsser, *Emilie Du Châtelet: Daring Genius of the Enlightenment*, Penguin, 2007 (paperback version of *La Dame d'Esprit: a Biography of the Marquise Du Châtelet*, Viking, 2006).
- [6] David Bodanis, *Passionate minds: the great Enlightenment love affair*, Little, Brown, 2006.