

WAM Theatre. Lenox, MA

Galileo's Daughter by Jessica Dickey. Directed by Reena Dutt.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“I’m a writer from New York looking for the letters of Galileo’s Daughter.”

In the realm of history plays, Jessica Dickey’s “Galileo’s Daughter” breaks new ground. The first character we meet identifies herself as the author of the play and tells us she is recounting her own story, a search for the letters of a long forgotten woman who was the daughter and amanuenses of a famous scholar, scientist and inventor. He is Galileo Galilei, the person who reoriented mankind to its place in the universe. While he was tried for heresy, she, his own dear Maria Celeste, was kept away from it all in a convent where she became a nun who died prematurely at the age of 34. The Writer becomes so enmeshed in the story that she ends up befriending the centuries dead girl and even imagines them jogging the streets of Florence together. In WAM’s production, directed by Reena Dutt, it all works.



Sandra Seoane-Serí, Diago Arciniegas; Photo: Maggie Hall

The dialogue is crisp and quick and produces very real people instead of characters. At times things move so quickly you almost get lost in the dialogue. Diago Archiniegas, who plays Galileo, also plays a dozen or so other roles and it is a bit confusing now and then when he moves rapidly from one to another. Each is well defined, but the play moves him without pause from one Italian to another. It is hard to keep up with him. As Galileo he is charming and informative and very pleased with himself. Not knowing much about the scientist he emerged as very real and also likeable.

Maria Celeste is played by Sandra Seoane-Serí who exhibits charm and talent in equal measure as she brings to modern life a girl who has been dead for over four centuries. The girl whose letters the author seeks turns out to be as literate as her father and potentially as brilliant a Philosopher/inventor as he was in their day. Seoane-Seri is a delight in the role. Whether admiring her father, or speaking what he has seen from her own perspective, or jogging in her nun's robes she is as worthwhile and honest as possible. It is an excellent portrait of the illegitimate girl could be. She is to be congratulated on her performance.



Caroline Kinsolving; Photo: Maggie Hall

In the difficult role of the writer, Caroline Kinsolving starts the play with an open and essential honesty that initially made me wonder if the author was playing herself. This was, in part, due to the fact that WAM provides no program to its audience, a fact that flies in the face of Actors' Equity contracts. Kinsolver plays the role with such conviction that she steals many moments that are essential to both stories, the writer's tale and that of the Galileis. She plays with honesty and reality and is perfection.

The physical production is superb. The set, designed by Drishti Chauhan, gives the actors everything they need to establish time and place. Andrea Sofia Sala's lighting design will remain one of my favorites of the season to come. She highlights the right things at the right times and gives the stage manager, Hope Rose Kelly, many opportunities to screw up essential moments which never happened. Kelly honors Sala's perfect design with a perfect show. The costumes and costume pieces created by Malorie R. Grillo were defining and definitive.

Dutt has delivered an ideal production of this play on every level. It is a play that both entertains and informs us about two historical moments in time. Even when the improbable occurs it feels right. This play moves to Cambridge next month and should do well in that Boston-based arena. It is an audience pleaser worth adding to your roster of shows seen.

+ 10/22/2024 +

Galileo's Daughter plays at the Elayne P. Bernstein Theatre at Shakespeare & Co., 70 Walker Street in Lenox, Massachusetts through November 3. For information and tickets go to www.Wamtheatre.org.