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WRITTEN IN THE STARS

OCT's *Silent Sky* tells story of little-known female astronomer

Like a lot of people, Corvallis-based theater director and educator Elizabeth Helman watched Neil deGrasse Tyson's *Cosmos* series on Netflix.

"I just happened to see a tiny little biography," Helman tells *EW*, "a 10-minute segment of the *Cosmos* series and it had this mini-biography about Henrietta Leavitt."

Henrietta Swan Leavitt was an American astronomer at the turn of the 20th century.

When Craig Willis, artistic director of Oregon Contemporary Theatre, gave Helman some scripts to consider directing, *Silent Sky*, Lauren Gunderson's 2011 play about Leavitt, caught Helman's attention.

Helman continues: "Months later I read the script and I went, 'Wait a minute! That sounds really familiar.'" She says it feels as though her decision to direct the play was written in the stars.

"It's a very sweet biographical story," Helman says, noting that Leavitt made some significant discoveries while working at Harvard — chiefly the relation between the luminosity and the period of Cepheid variable stars that later lead to the development of the Hubble telescope.

Perhaps that's all too science-y for you — Helman says it's even a bit too much for her.

"I've always been interested in astronomy and science," Helman jokes. "I'm horrible at science and I'm terrible at math, but I find it really fascinating."

"I just enjoyed the way the story was told," Helman says of *Silent Sky*. "It's warm and it's funny and comic and also true. It gets at a lot of issues about women in science, women in academia, issues of gender, issues of sexism. A lot of that still resonates today. A lot has changed but a lot of those old gender biases still exist," she says.

"The story is really human," Helman adds. "The characters are very real and they're funny and they're flawed."

Silent Sky runs Feb. 26 through March 19 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre. — William Kennedy



OCT'S SILENT SKY DIRECTOR ELIZABETH HELMAN

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