

SLICE OF HEAVEN

OCT'S *Silent Sky* tells the story of hearts and stars

Lauren Gunderson's 2011 play *Silent Sky* is about succeeding and failing, seeking and discovering, journeying and arriving. That is to say, it's the story of a life — the life of astronomer Henrietta Leavitt. *Silent Sky*, directed by Elizabeth Helman, is playing now at Oregon Contemporary Theatre.

Working at Harvard at the turn of the 20th century, Leavitt made significant discoveries leading to the development of the Hubble Telescope.

At the time there weren't many women working in the sciences, and *Silent Sky* pitches Leavitt as an unheralded feminist pioneer. The women working at Harvard are referred to as a "harem." Only men are allowed to use the telescope.

This is an important tale to tell, but it's far from the play's most interesting storyline. Instead, *Silent Sky*'s most vital moments come when playwright Lauren Gunderson contemplates life's big mysteries, such as: How can two sisters gaze at the heavens, as Leavitt and her sister Margaret do early in the play, one seeing answers while the other sees only questions?

Also, how can we know so much about our universe and still not understand what puts two human souls in orbit with one another? Leavitt and her Harvard colleague Peter Shaw experience this phenomenon as romance blossoms between them.

OCT's production, designed beautifully by Steen V. Mitchell, places the external next to the internal, mixing projected stars alongside handwritten text.

Leavitt, portrayed by Inga R. Wilson, embodies the young century's seemingly endless opportunities,



INGA R. WILSON (LEFT) AND ERICA TOWE IN OCT'S *SILENT SKY*

combining intrepid intelligence with Mae West's sauciness.

The romance between Leavitt and Shaw (played with charming affability by Cloud Pemble) has a Jimmy Stewart-Katharine Hepburn chemistry. Shaw makes rounds, checking on the women in the lab. "I come around," he says, awkwardly explaining his role. It works, and you root for the young couple, even when things turn rocky.

Silent Sky's supporting cast is strong top to bottom. Leavitt's sister Margaret (played with Midwestern sincerity by Erica Towe) balances Henrietta's intellectual curiosity with a steadfast faith that not everything in life can, or needs to be, explained by science.

Leavitt's labmates at Harvard, Annie and Williamina, frequently steal the show. Williamina (Sharon Sless) is a sharp-tongued, wizened old Scot, and Annie (Jen Ferro) is a battleship plowing the waters of 19th-century gender politics.

This pair of women gets the play's funniest moments, and the laughs are well earned. The camaraderie that develops among Leavitt, Annie and Williamina as they work alongside one another in the lab is pitch-perfect and a highlight of the show.

In a somewhat rushed last act — similar to the way history accelerated with women's suffrage, war and the floodgates of science thrown open ever wider — we see our cast at its most personal. As is often the case, each character learns that, sometimes, you have to travel outward in order to turn inward.

At several points Leavitt ponders: Exactly where are we? The answer comes, as it often does when we face mortality: Exactly where we've always been, and sometimes that's good enough. ■

Silent Sky runs through March 19 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; tickets and info at octratre.org or 465-1506.

GHOSTS OF THE DEAD

University Theatre's *Scorched* examines the plight of war refugees

Written in 2003, *Scorched* is by Lebanese-Canadian writer Wajdi Mouawad. Opening Thursday, March 3, University of Oregon theater arts instructor Michael Najjar directs the play at University Theatre.

"*Scorched* is about a pair of twins who attend the reading of their mother's will," Najjar explains. "They are charged by their mother to find their father and brother they never knew they had."

If the siblings don't follow this request, they are not allowed to bury their mother properly.

"The onus is on them to either meet this challenge or not," Najjar continues. In doing so, the twins go on a journey back in time through a series of flashbacks as well as an actual journey to their mother's home country, where they learn more about what their mother suffered during a civil war.

Najjar says the themes of war and refugees resonated with his family history. "My own family fled Lebanon," Najjar says. "My wife's family fled in the civil war as well."

Along with this personal connection to story, Najjar says he hopes the play helps to humanize the tragic headlines we see seemingly on a daily basis.

"On the news you'll hear 24 people died today, 50 people died today, 100 people died today, and these number float around," he says. "A play like this humanizes the story. You're forced to empathize with people who have been in wars."

"I think that is the power of the theater," Najjar says. "People are channeling those experiences directly in front of

the audience. This kind of a play can bring a kind of awareness to the situation. I hope the play will resonate on a much, much deeper level, especially given all the stories we hear every day about the refugee crisis."

"The point is for us to really take a moment and explore these people's lives and try to speak for them," Najjar says. "The ghosts of the dead are speaking."

Najjar warns that, although the play is very serious, it contains elements of humor as well as a love story. "Any good piece of art has to focus on the light and the dark," Najjar says.

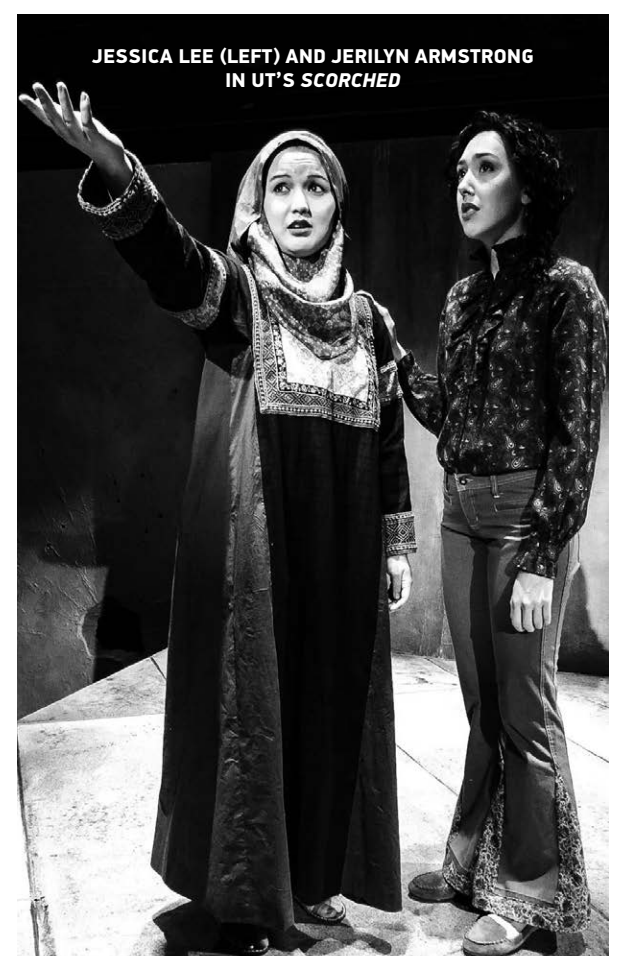
And he adds that one of *Scorched*'s most important messages comes from the mother, speaking to her children from beyond the grave.

"Their lives began in two different ways," Najjar says of the play's sibling leads. "One was in horror and one was in love. She tells them it's really up to them. It's up to them to choose which of those stories they want to believe in."

Here Najjar quotes from the script, recalling that the mother asks, "Where does your story begin? At your birth? Then it begins in horror. At your father's birth? Then it is a beautiful love story. When they ask you to tell your story, tell them your story goes back to the day when a young girl went back to her native village to engrave her grandmother's name on a gravestone."

"It really asks us, as audience members, what do we think of as our origin stories?" Najjar says. "If we have a choice, can we look at a different starting point? The play asks the audience to take a deep personal journey." ■

Scorched runs March 3-13 at UO's Hope Theatre; for mature audiences only. Tickets and info at blogs.uoregon.edu/theatre.



JESSICA LEE (LEFT) AND JERILYN ARMSTRONG IN UT'S *SCORCHED*