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Émilie Is an Amazing Play About an Amazing Woman: Informative, Entertaining, and Uplifting

Posted by [Pamela Vesper and Kurt Benrud](#) • June 15th, 2016 • [Printer-friendly](#)



The cast includes (from left) Eric Hale, Nan Stephenson, Byron Jennings, Mary Floyd Page, and Laura Levine

Produced in the [Murphey School Auditorium](#) as part of [Burning Coal Theatre Company's "Wait Til You See This"](#) second-stage series, [Exit Through Eden's](#) presentation of [Émilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight](#) by [Lauren Gunderson](#) provides the total package. It is informative, entertaining, engaging, uplifting ... and the list could go on!

Director [Sue Scarborough](#) deserves high praise for casting, pacing, blocking, and every other choice that directors make. Simply put, this is a great piece, produced in a great space, using great people in every capacity.

Atlanta-born San Francisco playwright and screenwriter [Lauren Gunderson](#) answers the question of "Who is [Émilie du Châtelet](#)?" thus: "*Oh, just a stunning lady badass of the [French Enlightenment](#) that you'll never forget. No big deal.*" And she continues: "*[She] was a sexy French brain-powered phenom of the Enlightenment. She was a tour de force of a woman. A physicist at a time before there was such a word, a mathematical genius, a card shark (the practical use of her mathematical genius), a published author, and the love of [Voltaire's](#) life. And she was a woman. Which made everything I just mentioned ten times harder to achieve [except] being Voltaire's lover ... which would have been*

easy to start, but not to maintain for over ten years.” Born in 1706, **Émilie du Châtelet** died in 1749 as a result of complications of childbirth.

As the lights come up, we are introduced to Émilie at the moment of her death. She “rises” from this death and takes us on an introspective tour of her life. Are we flies-on-the-wall? Does she “see her life flashing before her eyes?”

Among her first observations, she states: “I died without answers.” Presumably, the ensuing spectacle is a quest for those answers. And there is a curious stop-restart effect in the first few minutes that immediately lets us know that Émilie is refusing to allow herself to be defined by anyone other than herself.

We learn about her love for science (which she calls “philosophy”) and her love for love. In fact, there is a blackboard upstage; and we see her keeping score in this contest of “head vs. heart.” On this blackboard, among other scientific “doodling,” is the equation: “ $F = mv^2$.” Do not underestimate its significance. As her story unfolds, the various episodes of her life are introduced with the phrase: “The Scene in Which”

The script calls for five actors: one to play Émilie, one to play Voltaire, and an ensemble of one man and two women to play various characters in Émilie’s life. **Mary Floyd Page** is superb as Émilie. She keeps the audience engaged throughout. We feel the character’s gentle humor, and we admire her self-confidence. We feel her highs and her lows, and we are brought to the brink of tears more than once. Page has an uncanny ability to make each audience member feel as though he or she is engaged one-on-one with the character.

We could not imagine better casting than **Eric Hale** as Voltaire. It is easy for us to see why Émilie would fall in love with this character. Is Voltaire “full-of-himself?” Yes, but there is a vulnerability hiding just below the surface, a vulnerability that Hale makes evident at the appropriate moments. (Hale, incidentally, is founder and managing director of Exit Through Eden, and he served as dramaturg for this production.)

The ensemble consists of **Laura Levine**, **Nan L. Stephenson**, and **Byron Jennings**. All three are brilliant in their multiple roles, creating a variety of distinct characters and now-and-then even switching between them right before our eyes.

Among her other characters, Laura Levine serves as “stand-in” for Émilie in many of these vignettes. The playwright makes very appropriate and revealing choices of which of the two “Émilies” speaks which lines in these scenes.

Indeed, some phrases are spoken in unison; and some are delivered in an alternating, **stichomythic** fashion. Watch for other expert uses of **stichomythia**, including a tug-of-war between Voltaire and a certain soldier-poet.

Among other characters, Byron Jennings gives us Émilie’s husband, **Sir Isaac Newton**, and a soldier-poet lover who fathers Émilie’s child. We lost count of the number of Jennings’ characters’ wigs at three. Jennings has a gift for something that we can only refer to as “acting with his eyes.” On multiple occasions, we found ourselves directed by his character’s gaze, looking to see what that character was looking at, even to the point of looking way offstage in one instance. Impressive!

Nan Stephenson’s characters included Émilie’s mother. Pay attention to two mother-daughter scenes in this play; they are both quite telling. All of Stephenson’s characters have a degree of feistiness appropriate to the roles.

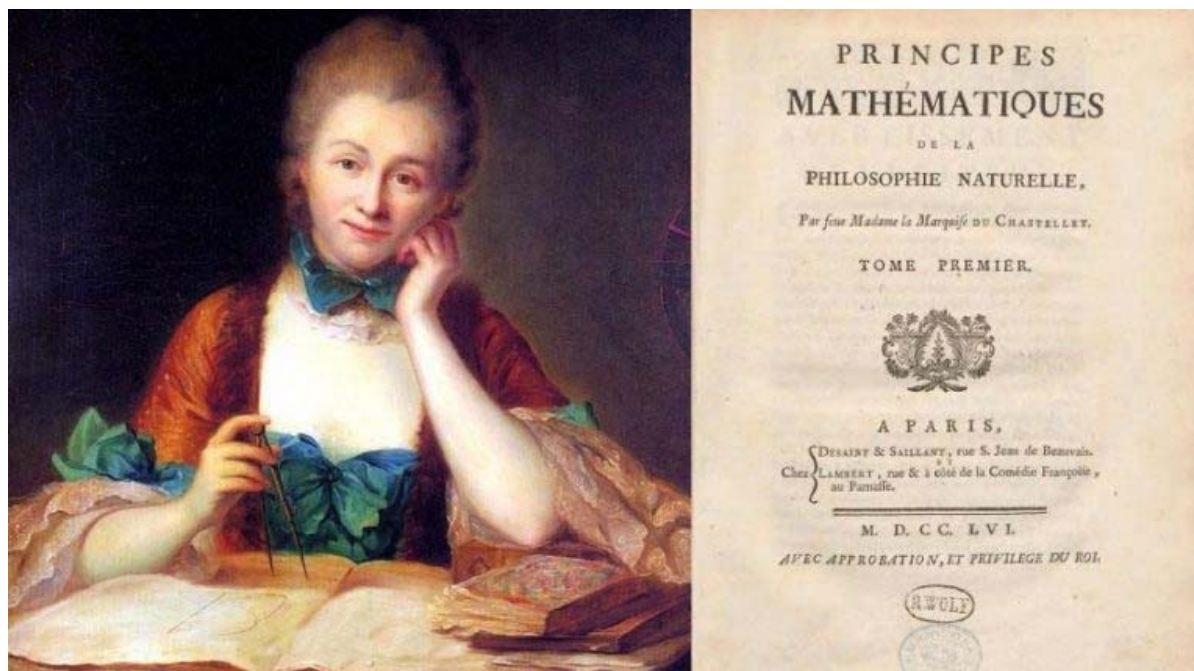
From our stage-left vantage point, we were treated to a view of the characters backstage in costume well before the action began. And we knew immediately that we would need to give well-deserved kudos to costume designer **Bonnie Raddatz**. Sound (by **Steve Burnett**) and lighting (by **Matthew E.**

Adelson) appropriately enhance the already high quality of this production.

Our Department of Picky-Picky, very impressed with the use of feather-quill pens, would have liked to have seen inkwells on the desks. (How picky can you get?)

It would have been interesting to take a preshow poll: How many of you had heard of this amazing woman before hearing about this play? We would have been among those who had not. Likewise, we would have been among the solid majority who found ourselves glad to have met her and to have had this vehicle to get to know her this intimately.

This joint production of **Émilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight** is one of the best shows that we have attended this year. Catch it if you can!



Émilie du Châtelet was a brilliant 18th century French mathematician, physicist, and writer

SECOND OPINION: June 12th Raleigh, NC CVNC review by **Jackson Cooper:** <http://cvnc.org/article.cfm?articleId=8021>; and June 8th Durham, NC Indy Week mini-preview by **Byron Woods:** <http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/insomnia-the-fringe-dwellers-emilie/Event?oid=5039525>.

Burning Coal Theatre Company and **Exit Through Eden** present **ÉMILIE: LA MARQUISE DU CHÂTELET DEFENDS HER LIFE TONIGHT** at 7:30 p.m. June 16, 19, and 25, and 2 p.m. June 26 in **Murphey School Auditorium**, 224 Polk St., Raleigh, North Carolina 27604, near the **Historic Oakwood Section**, presented as part of Burning Coal's "**Wait Til You See This**" second-stage series.

TICKETS: \$10.

BOX OFFICE: 919-834-4001 or <http://www.etix.com/>.

SHOW: <http://burningcoal.org/tbd2/>, <http://www.exitthrougheden.org/>, and <https://www.facebook.com/events/1747383562215078/>.

PRESENTERS:

Burning Coal Theatre Company: <http://www.burningcoal.org/>, <https://www.facebook.com/Burning.Coal.Theatre>, and <https://twitter.com/burningcoaltc>.

Exit Through Eden: <http://www.exitthrougheden.org/>.

VENUE/DIRECTIONS: <http://burningcoal.org/murphey-school-auditorium/>.

OTHER LINKS:

Gabrielle-Émilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil, marquise du Châtelet (French mathematician, physicist, and writer, 1706-49): <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Gabrielle-Emilie-Le-Tonnelier-de-Breteuil-Marquise-du-Chatelet> (Encyclopædia Britannica) and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89milie_du_Ch%C3%A2telet (Wikipedia).

Émilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight (2009 dramatic comedy): <http://www.samuel french.com/p/857/emilie-la-marquise-du-ch%C3%A2telet-defends-her-life-tonight> (Samuel French, Inc.) and <https://sites.google.com/site/emiliedefendsherlifetonight/> (fan site).

Lauren Gunderson (Atlanta-born San Francisco playwright and screenwriter): <http://laurengunderson.com/> (official website), <http://laurengunderson.com/category/blog/> (her blog), and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lauren_Gunderson (Wikipedia).

Sue Scarborough (Raleigh, NC director): <https://www.facebook.com/sue.scarborough.710> (Facebook page).

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Pamela Vesper has been a Raleigh resident for more than 20 years. A local attorney for licensed professionals, when she's not in court, Pam can be found watching or participating in local theater productions or enjoying the vibrant Raleigh music and craft beer scene. She also loves indie and foreign films and was an anchor on the local cable show, **Movie Minutes**. Pam has an opinion on just about everything; just ask her. **Kurt Benrud** is a graduate of **Cary High School** and **N.C. State University**, and he has taught English at both. He first became involved in local theater in 1980. He has served on the board of directors for both the **Cary Players** and the **Cary Playwrights' Forum**. He is also a volunteer reader with **Triangle Radio Reading Service**. Click [here](#) to read their reviews for **Triangle Review** and **Triangle Arts and Entertainment**.



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