“Silent Sky” Performance Review

“Silent Sky” by Lauren Gunderson, as produced by Southwestern University’s Sarofim School of Fine Arts and director Kathleen Juhl, is a drama based on the real-life stories and discoveries of three women (Henrietta Leavitt, Williamina Fleming, and Annie Cannon). The plot concerns the experiences of Leavitt, Fleming, and Cannon as women working in the Harvard Observatory in the early 1900s and, in the case of Leavitt, also explores personal life issues and complications. The protagonist, Henrietta Leavitt, begins the play as the newest addition to the women working at the Observatory. Through the course of the play, she embarks on a journey to make her mark on the field of science, thus battling the obstacles that inherently ensue in the presence of a male-dominated societal hierarchy, while also having to juggle obligations to her family and the possibility of love with her fellow Observatory colleague, Peter Shaw. In this production of historical fiction, realistic acting style is employed in order to attempt to accurately portray characters based on the lives of real women. On the other hand, the design style is a little more abstract as lighting rather than set distinguishes between locations. For example, the Wisconsin living room is center stage at the beginning of the play, but, as the play progresses, the Observatory also appears center stage, as does the ocean liner. With this scenario, it is the brightness, warmth, and shape of the lighting that attempts to distinguish each of these locations. The Observatory, for example, has very bright, clinical white lighting in the shape of windows while the Wisconsin home has much more yellow, cheery lighting to suggest a more homely, comfortable space. Overall, the techniques chosen, both on part of the acting and the design, helped to create a production that was effective in communicating its meaning to the audience. Central to this meaning was the act of transmitting to the audience the symbols of Earth’s seemingly finite nature in comparison with the vastness of space and pointing to the cyclical nature of human life on Earth. In addition, the production seeks to initiate thought in the minds of the audience members in terms of examining the merits of the play as a potential feminist piece of art and of ascertaining whether or not certain character relationships were written to be intentionally two dimensional or not.

Henrietta Leavitt, played by Joan Milburn, is a character defined by her persistence and tenacity to accomplish dreams of publishing her own scientific research despite trying to be held back from doing so by the male dominated scientific world and society at large. Milburn conveys Henrietta’s intelligence and determination through the use of very purposeful movement that is achieved by establishing an economic level of tension. Milburn also demonstrated her character’s strict professionalism and career-mindedness through a rather conventional relationship to the architecture. By this, a “conventional” relationship can be taken to mean that stools and chairs are sat on, never leaned against, slumped over, or stood on. For example, even when Henrietta is seen falling asleep onstage, only her elbows and forehead touch her desk. When she is crying, she even goes as far to completely disengage from the desk and turn upstage in her stool. These two specific actions in relationship to the architecture illustrate how Milburn wishes to reinforce Henrietta’s conscious efforts to constantly maintain composure and sophistication to the audience.

Christian Erben as Williamina Fleming takes on this often feisty and sarcastic character through the use of vocal tone, behavioral gesture, and shape. In terms of vocal tone, she puts particular stress on specific individual words in her lines in order to inject sarcasm mixed with a certain level of condescension. With behavioral gesture, Erben emphasizes her witty quips through matching her facial gesture to the attitude of her dialogue. She does predominantly this by raising her eyebrows. Her shape, though inherently restricted by her period corset, seems to imply the sassy essence of standing with hands on hips without having to actually perform said action directly. Her rather unique physical subtext is achieved through a slight yet perceivable cocking of the head to one side when standing that seems to suggest a sarcastic, skeptical questioning of those around her that she disagrees with.

Chris Szeto-Joe as Peter Shaw occupies a unique role in “Silent Sky” by fulfilling the show’s lone male character part and, equally, a part that has been proved by scholars to have been fictionally created by Gunderson. While the women of the show are often placed as being “women in a man’s world”, Peter Shaw’s intervention in the “women’s only” computing work places him in a space of being almost a sort of “man in a woman’s world”. Szeto-Joe illustrates Peter Shaw’s lack of comfortability in such a role in his intentional manipulation of tempo and duration. For example, in response to one of many of Williamina’s sarcastic quips about Peter’s interest in Henrietta, Szeto-Joe employs the strategy of exiting the room with a speed relative to his character’s embarrassment. Szeto-Joe also indicates his challenging relationship with Henrietta and his difficulty in vying for her love through topography. He does this by leaving the stage with a diagonal floor pattern in the opposite direction of Henrietta. This literal divergence in exiting the stage formed a powerful symbol of separation of the two characters that was deeply important to the audience’s understanding of the trials and tribulations and, ultimately, of the failures, of this relationship.

Margaret “Margi” Leavitt, played by Cassidy Mayfield, is Henrietta’s younger sister and a character largely defined by her position as a foil to Henrietta. While Henrietta is deeply career-minded and quite adamantly opposed to the notion of starting a family, Margi is much more sentimental towards notions of having her own family and avidly embraces the opportunity to perform tasks within the domestic sphere, including responsibilities as a wife and mother. Mayfield demonstrates these contradictions between the two sister characters by utilizing big, loose, excited movements in order to juxtapose Henrietta’s economic state of tension. This, overall, gives her a less refined, more rambunctious characterization.

Annie Cannon, played by Alejandra Reyes Salinas, is initially presented to the audience as the most uptight and strict of the Observatory women characters. However, there is a clear character arc for Annie, which includes some softening of her tough persona, as demonstrated by her act of “giv[ing] Margaret an uncharacteristically large hug” in Act Two, Scene Two (Gunderson 51). Reyes Salinas illustrates this softening change by employing strategies pertaining to spatial relationships, as this stage direction suggests. Reyes Salinas closes the distance between her and other characters onstage as her softening of temperament becomes more noticeable in order to demonstrate physically the emotional barriers that she has broken down within herself.

In terms of how I, as an actor, may apply the strategies employed in this show to my own theatrical practice, I drew influence from both the acting techniques demonstrated and the specific design choices of the production. As an actor that has worked a lot in Shakespeare and enjoys the direct expression of thought through spoken word that is integral to many classic works, I often have a difficult time with the idea of expressing subtext through the dialogue that is so prevalent in contemporary theater. The actors of “Silent Sky”*,* while they were portraying the early 1900s to 1920s, illustrated how to play with subtext in profound ways that I believe I can learn from. Chris Szeto-Joe’s character, Peter Shaw, is perhaps the best example in that he so often works to ensure that his character shows restraint in the most difficult moments. With Peter being surrounded by women (and particularly his love interest, Henrietta), he has the difficult task of indicating his romantic interest in Henrietta while also having to think about the conflicting objectives of maintaining professionalism in the work environment and preserving the masculinity that is ardently imposed upon him by his contemporary society. These factors playing alongside one another are what so often prompt Peter’s moments of embarrassment immediately followed by an attempt to mask the embarrassment that has just taken place. I, like Szeto-Joe, want to be the kind of actor that is interesting to watch because I am not always fully portraying each individual thing that my character is thinking. Rather, I want to learn how to acquire skills that will enable me to pursue the more realistic approach of portraying one thing while thinking another, just like real human beings do in actuality. In terms of how set and design elements inspired me, the integration of circular floor design and the cyclical nature of earthly events was a powerful metaphor. It will inspire me to use literal representations with underlying symbolic meaning in my work. In other words, I will approach abstract themes and motifs with the idea in mind of “how might I best represent this literally and tangibly for my audience?”.

In conclusion, it is clear that specific acting choices and particular stylistic design elements worked to convey to the audience the significance of thinking critically about Earth and space and about the presence of feminism within the practice of theatre. On the part of the actors, the utilization of viewpoints and Lecoq-esque techniques succeeded to enforce a sense of realism that pertained to the accurate portrayal real historical figures. This sense of realism executed by the actors, thus, informs and influences my practice as an actor in terms of comprehending how to speak through dialogue with subtext in mind. Finally, the tangibility and underlying meaning of the floor design elements aided my practice in terms of understanding the definite intersection of literal and abstract representations.

Total Word Count: 1,617 words

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I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.

-Hannah Rutt