

‘Leap’ structures a formula for fantasy

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Science Theater. No longer the domain of B-list movies, ‘Leap’ follows the recent theatrical fashion of attempting to bridge the gap between the sciences and humanities. Taking after such works as ‘Copenhagen’ and ‘The Five Hysterical Girls Theorem,’ Lauren Gunderson re-imagines the “plague years” of mathematician and physicist Isaac Newton, when he was forced to retreat to his childhood home from an outbreak of the bubonic plague at Cambridge. Originally premiered in February of 2004 at Theater Emory in Atlanta, Gunderson takes liberties with history and biography and poses a “modern mythology” of two ageless, mysterious “muses” (Maria and Brightman) that visit Newton (and every other historical genius) to aid the creative process.

“Many of my plays are biographical, so I have that person’s life to go on as well as the time period they’re in,” explained Gunderson in the Los Angeles Times. “But it’s not like a documentary. As the dramatist, I can say who the story is really about and how we are going to tell it.”

That author’s presence seems to be the play’s only flaw: “A lot of my pieces are science- or history-based,” said Ms. Gunderson. “So, most of my creative development starts with research.” Long tracts of theory collide with attempts



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Powerful performances by leading senior actors pulled the audience into a fantastic world.

at an occasionally irrelevant, almost Stoppardian

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metatheatricality, and the play devolves into clever

moments of showing off. Some of the best moments are ruined by musical chimes or onslaughts of needless heroic couplets that twist the audience's willing suspension of disbelief into dramatic tackiness. Much, regrettably, is left unexplained. Who, for example, actually are Maria and Brightman? Muses? Angels? Much like the general theme of the play (that not everything may be discovered by one man, even Newton), we are left tantalizingly and annoyingly in the lurch.

Script issues aside, this was a phenomenal production. Ross Bell '10, who hitherto has worked principally with lighting design, makes his first outing as a director with this production, and quite a fortuitous start. The actors' chemistry was (if I may indulge a pun) explosive. The sisters, Maria (Lucy Faust '09) and Brightman (Steph Spencer '09), play off one another perfectly, and the relatively minor roles of Lucas (Ken Grinde '11) and Hannah (Lauren Fondren '09), strengthen and humanize an otherwise heady play.

Charmingly preoccupied with her own thoughts, Faust as Maria nevertheless exudes a tempering energy present in the long exchanges between her sister and Newton. Faust has impeccable delivery, managing somehow to convey the extraordinary complexity of being immortal and perpetually twelve years old. This says nothing of her comedic timing, which is flawless: in the discussion on irony, she interjects, "Have you ever seen an ostrich?" in such a way that charms, humors and illuminates much of the heavy-handedness of the script.

Foiled against Maria is Spencer as Brightman, who sent the audience rollicking through fits of passion and almost reckless abandon. One can't help but admire such sprezzatura: she flings out theories, technical terms and languages (Greek, Hebrew, French, but not Latin) like familiar things she found in her pockets - easily and casually. Seeing her convincingly and intelligently tell off Will Damron '09 in multiple languages, one would think she could do it to anyone on the street.

Yet it was Damron that impressed most. Last seen as Pale in *Burn This*, one initially might expect him a little too hunky to portray a young Isaac Newton. Using his build to his advantage, he projects a powerful body language that plays into the character's development, showing us frustration, alienation and the sheer social ineptitude of his character by roaring the muses out of his room, or declaring, "I am a genius!" to his pushy, parasitic mother. But he never neglects Newton's delicate handling of a prism or the quiet moments of silent work that ground the character's sense of high moral purpose. These moments in character work mark not only fine direction, but complex consideration of a potentially flat personality. In short, Damron humanizes an enigmatic and aloof historical figure, even if his hair wasn't gray in the final scene.

Don't worry, though: despite the success of this and other science-based plays - i.e., 2007's 'Five Hysterical Girls Theorem' - the English and Theater Departments aren't moving into McCardell Bicentennial Hall.

Yet.