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THROUGH 6/26: *Emilie Is Passionate Despite Problems*

By [Jackson Cooper](#)

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Written across a chalkboard on an otherwise empty [Burning Coal Theatre Company](#) stage are mathematical equations surrounding the words "LOVE" and "PHILOSOPHY." There are blank spaces underneath the two words, as though they were opposing teams dueling against one another. Over the course of the next 90 minutes, they are. [Exit Through Eden's](#) production of *Emilie: La Marquise Du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight*, playing as a part of Burning Coal's Wait Till You See This festival, makes us forget anything else is in opposition except our opinion of what we are seeing and what is being said.

Lauren Gunderson's play chronicles the titular character, who tells us in the opening moments that she is dead. She uses our time with her to look back in order to find an answer to the most confounding equation she encountered: her life. The play is based on fact; Emilie contributed countless achievements in the field of physics and to the scientific world despite the difficulties her gender faced at the time. She had a love affair with French philosopher and opera librettist Voltaire, translated Newton's works into French, and plenty more you can read about on [her Wikipedia page](#), which is a bit more detailed than Gunderson's text.

Emilie keeps constant score of love and philosophy throughout her encounters with her husband, her lover Voltaire, her mother, the court, and others. As she navigates us through her life, she confesses that she never understood why her work was not accepted by society, nor why her incessant need for working made others, such as Voltaire and her daughter, feel neglected. Surely, since she is as brilliant as she says she is, shouldn't everyone understand her need to push people away?

Thus lies the problem with a play like *Emilie*. The production, directed by Sue Scarborough, is so enthusiastically performed and staged with some surprisingly fulfilling choices that the case is made that the play has much worth to it. It does, if you know nothing about Emilie (and who does?) and want to feel convincingly intellectual at the theatre. All of the talk about force and velocity mixed with some bawdy dialogue centered on sex may make audiences feel as though they understand the urges and musings of these 18th century characters.

It is quite the worthy spectacle to see Emilie throw embittered jabs at Voltaire with the same voracity a wife on a soap opera throws at her cheating husband. When the play touches on matters of the heart, it feels as emotionally inconsistent as one of those episodes. The play *Emilie* may appeal to audiences who prefer their theatre to show that what they are watching is intellectually stimulating, even if later that evening the effect wears off and you are left with residual indifference.

This production masks the inconsistencies of the play behind a cloak of confident delivery. Mary Floyd Page played Emilie with passionate fervor. The rest of the company (Eric Hale, Laura Levine, Nan Stephenson, and Byron

Jennings) performed their (sometimes multiple) roles with entertaining flair. It was hard not to be swept up in this production's passion. Some shaky moments in the text were revealed despite the actors' extreme commitment and the convincing costumes (gorgeously fitted by Bonnie Raddatz). Both elements gave the illusion to the audience that the play is a perfect one. Sadly, nothing quite adds up.

Emilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight continues through Sunday, June 26. For more details on this production, please view the sidebar.

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