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Four strong women featured in THT's 'The Revolutionists'

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Sarah Mitchell and Kimberly Ridgeway in "The Revolutionists" at Town Hall Theatre. Photos Jay Yamada

It was an especially hard time for women in revolutionary France - when a woman was still considered a second-class citizen, and could still be beheaded for her political opinions. Playwright Lauren Gunderson chose to give a glimpse of the life of four remarkable women of that time, and for us to ponder what fighting for women's rights really meant when one's life was on the line.

The four very different women on stage try in their own way to transcend the predicament of their sex and attempt to effect change in a meaningful way during this tumultuous time.

The four characters are Marie-Antoinette, former queen of France, Charlotte Corday, political activist and assassin, Olympe de Gouges, playwright and writer of the bill of rights of women, and Marianne Angelle, a fictional black woman from the Caribbean who fights to free slaves. The play is not necessarily a history lesson,

though the historical facts cited in the play are correct. Gunderson does not necessarily spend her time detailing who these four women were and what motivated them. What she presents is more a silhouette of who they were. Dressed in the accouterment of the period, the four women use contemporary language - including profanity, and body language that do a lot for the farcical aspect of the play.

The character de Gouges is a playwright herself and she wants to write something important about the events that are unfolding around her. She articulates the problematic that interlaces the whole play, is art necessary and meaningful when history runs amok? Is writing plays something more than a distraction for the rich? Corday and Angelle are action heroes, yet they seek the writer, because, in their own words if a story is not written, if words are not put behind it, then the story cannot endure, it does not exist.

The four women chosen by director Susan Evans hold their parts with passion. Heather Kellogg as Charlotte Corday, "the angel of assassin" is full of fire and conviction, Sarah Mitchell as Olympe de Gouges wavers from passionate to being full of doubts, Kimberly Ridgeway as Marianne Angelle is a survivor and a fighter, Suzie Shepard as Marie-Antoinette is moving despite her foolishness, or maybe because of it.

De Gouges would have deserved a play of her own to pay tribute to her extraordinary courage and endeavors. She wrote, "A woman has the right to mount the scaffold. She must possess equally the right to mount the speaker's platform." Because she opposed the most extreme of revolutionaries she was executed in November 1793. Corday was an educated young girl living in the countryside who dreamed of republic and freedom for all. When extremists entered the French revolution, terrorizing and killing their opponents, she decided that the one journalist that had inflamed passions through his fanatical writing had to die so all could be saved. She knew she would die for her action and she was executed in July 1793. Marie Antoinette was executed in October 1793, 10 months after her husband, King Louis XVI.

Director Susan Evans, also artistic director at Town Hall Theatre, explains that she was able to gather an entirely female crew, including all the production team, to produce this play. She chose the play because she found Gunderson's text to be very relevant to our time, and a poignant drama, with many moments of humor. She noted that the writer was the most produced playwright in America in 2017; Gunderson was also the winner of the Lanford Wilson Award, the Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and the Otis Guernsey New Voices Award. This production of "The Revolutionists" in Lafayette is a Bay Area premiere.

Opening night was Sept. 29 and the play will continue at Town Hall Theater through Oct. 20. Different events, such as Theater Club nights when patrons are encouraged to stay after the presentation to talk with the cast and director, are also scheduled. For information, visit www.townhalltheatre.com.



From left: Sarah Mitchell, Suzie Shepard, Kimberly Ridgeway and Heather Kellogg in "The Revolutionists" at Town Hall Theatre.

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