

Northumberland Players Silent Sky play makes for a great evening of theatre

This play is overflowing with ideas as big as the universe, writes play reviewer Rob Davidson

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Rob Davidson is a reviewer for the Northumberland Players. - Jay Kemp

Silent Sky, which just opened at the Firehall Theatre, is the story of Henrietta Leavitt.

Leavitt was an astronomer at the turn of the last century who managed to figure out how to measure the distance from the Earth to the stars.

Admittedly, this sounds pretty dry. But it is also a story of love and compassion, overflowing with ideas as big as the universe.

Directed by Valerie Russell, it takes place inside a simple set that accommodates itself to a country field at night, a rambling farmhouse in Wisconsin, the computer lab inside the Harvard observatory, the deck of a Transatlantic ocean liner, and most astonishingly, the entire planet as the last century of history whizzes by.

As well as clearly and eloquently laying out some pretty big cosmological concepts, the play also examines gender inequality, pointing out what a short distance we've come since the suffragettes agitated for the vote at the end of the 19th century.

Lucy Caldwell, as Henrietta Leavitt, brings the naive, stubborn and brilliant parson's daughter to vivid life, allowing us to share her moments of inspiration and surprise in both her work and love life.

Ian Everdell manages to make a 19th century nerd, Peter Shaw, both immensely likable and infuriating at the same time.

Meanwhile, Carol Beauchamp as Williamina Fleming, a Scottish immigrant who transitioned from housekeeper to the discoverer of 59 Nebula in her work at Harvard is the heart of the show. She's a mother figure who chides her charges while enveloping them in protective love and admiration.

April Corning is the sister to Henrietta. She supports her sibling's career ambitions and at the same time, gently pleads with her sister to give up this silliness and come back home to Wisconsin.

Rebecca Rennicks plays Annie Cannon with gusto. She's an early suffragette, mathematician and the sort of ferocious alpha-woman you want in your corner.

Rennicks can turn her cherubic face instantly into an expression of contempt and impatience and she uses this to great effect here.

Big ideas crammed into a small theatre makes for a great evening of theatre.

Silent Sky runs until April 6.