

# An Experiment in Love and Philosophy

BY KELLY MILLER

In Lauren Gunderson's new play, legendary French physicist Emilie Du Châtelet returns from the dead to solve the final questions of her life:

"I died thinking what was the point? All of my heart or all of my mind? Feeling or knowing. Passion or Reason. Love... or Philosophy?"

And so begins Emilie's last — and most important — experiment. A theatrical quest to reconcile and defend her greatest work: her own life.

Gunderson's thrilling, biographical play *Emilie—La Marquise Du Châtelet Defends Her Life at the Petit Théâtre at Cirey Tonight* is Emilie's dramatic investigation of the cumulative meaning of her own work, love and intellectual legacy.

A woman born of the French Enlightenment, Emilie Du Châtelet was a revolutionary female scientist, prodigious intellect, stunning beauty, and social rebel. An 18th century Parisian aristocrat by birth, she was best known for her work as a mathematician, physicist, and author — and for her lifelong love affair with the controversial writer and philosopher Voltaire.

Gunderson not only dramatizes the historical facts of Emilie's life — her formidable intellect and body of work, her marriage of social convenience, and scandalous love affairs — but she also filters her history and characters through fragmented time and space, memory and fact, until they collide. A mature Emilie advises



Daniel Blinkoff and Katrina Lenk in the 2008 PPF reading of *Emilie*.

and interacts with her younger self throughout the play. Her family, tutors, husband, daughter and lovers (past and present) all intersect.

The play is both a biographical history and a playful experiment in dramatic form, written with a circular, feminine structure, as opposed to a more traditional "masculine" linear form. Gunderson utilizes direct-address and meta-theatricality throughout the play — having our



Playwright Lauren Gunderson

heroine speak directly to us, the audience, while challenging the conventions of realism and the laws of time and space.

Gunderson received an SCR commission funded by the Elizabeth George Foundation to write *Emilie* in 2007. The play had a reading at the 2008 Pacific Playwrights Festival and will anchor the 2009 festival as one of its two full productions.

*"The laws of the heart are based in such violence. They are starved and overwhelmed and just destructive to good behavior. The laws of the universe are clean, ordered and predictable. To know the universe? Be diligent. To know the heart? Be brave."*

— Emilie Du Châtelet from *Emilie—La Marquise Du Châtelet Defends Her Life At the Petit Théâtre at Cirey Tonight* by Lauren Gunderson

SCR Artistic Director David Emmes, who's directing the world premiere production of *Emilie* on the Argyros Stage, relishes its "tremendous theatricality." "It's a piece," he says, "that's so wonderfully unique to the theatre. It's a play that will best manifest itself on stage, as it shifts seamlessly between the multiple realities of Emilie's mind and her imagination, time and space."

Join us for a wild theatrical ride, in which Emilie du Châtelet tells the story of her life, *her* way centuries after she lived, loved and worked with such complete commitment — and total abandon.

## A Wild Enlightenment Ride

*An Interview with Playwright Lauren Gunderson*

SCR's Literary Manager Kelly Miller spoke to Lauren Gunderson recently about *Emilie—La Marquise Du Châtelet Defends Her Life At the Petit Théâtre at Cirey Tonight*.

**What is it about Emilie Du Châtelet that inspired you to write this play?**

I'm a big fan of biographies, especially science biographies, *especially* women scientists. I came across Judith Zinsser's book *Emilie Du Châtelet: Daring Genius of the Enlightenment* and was immediately entranced by Emilie's life, love and genius. I said to myself — this is the play I've wanted to write since I started writing plays. It's a perfect combination of my passion for wom-

en's lives, science, history, bold theatricality, love stories and metaphysical questions of purpose and life.

**Stylistically, *Emilie* is such a fun, theatrical ride. Is it typical of your other plays?**

I love plays that overtake you with the world they depict. *Emilie* is this kind of play and lets me tell a whole life in two hours — and not just *any* life, but Emilie's passionate, world-conquering, battle-of-the-minds love story. Her life and work was so amazing, I had to find a theatrical form that could match it. Because she is a scientist, I also wanted to have her build her world through exploration and experiment. The structure of the play is a kind of dramatic experiment where our heroine discovers as much as she dictates.

You've got to be ready for a wild Enlightenment ride with this one!

**Do you think Emilie's struggle to reconcile love and philosophy (work, love, and family) in the 18th century (and in the play) still resonates today?**

Yes. This play is really inspired by and dedicated to the many strong, loving, adamant women I've been so lucky to know in my life — my grandmother, Irene, who worked tirelessly while my grandfather was a POW during WW2; my grandmother, Bea, who was a traveler, reader and matriarch; my mom, who had a career in medicine and was a "dinner-at-six" woman; my mentors and teachers ... this play is about women throughout history who struggle but also love, embrace their passions and their minds, succeed and fail, are proud and wounded, learn and teach. Emilie provides an extraordinary example of an imperfect but inspiring woman who never stopped being curious about the

wide and small world.

***Emilie* has had a rich history with SCR, starting as an Elizabeth George commission, being developed in the 2008 Pacific Playwrights Festival and produced in this year's festival. What have been some of the highlights of writing and developing the play?**

Getting the Elizabeth George commission was a huge turning point in my life as a writer — and a triumph of career development and professional respect. To see the play receive such great development support at PPF was an inspirational experience. *Then* to get the call from SCR that offered *Emilie* a premiere in the 2008 PPF was not just gratifying, it was a bright beginning to a new phase of my career. SCR and its fabulous, generous, and talented artists have given me everything a young writer could ask for. I feel not just lucky, I feel at home.