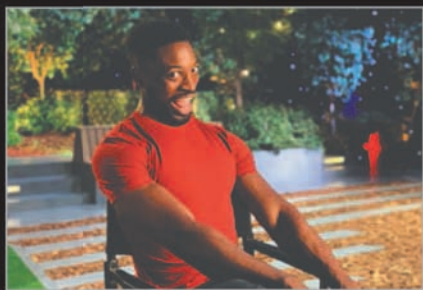


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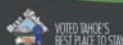
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BY JESSICA SANTINA



Debra Lynn Hull (left), Sara Mackie and Kathy Welch play early 20th century computers in *Silent Sky*.
PHOTO/JERI CHADWELL

Star girls

It's an old, worn chestnut that behind every successful man is a woman. Tired though it may be, it could have originated with Henrietta Leavitt, the woman whose careful, thankless research gave the scientific world a method for measuring the universe. Her story is lovingly told in Lauren Gunderson's play *Silent Sky*, currently in production at Restless Artists Theatre.

The film *Hidden Figures* first introduced me to the scores of African American women working as "computers" behind the scenes in segregated quarters, doing the day-in, day-out mathematical calculations that enabled the U.S. to win the Space Race. But before all that, in early 1900s Cambridge, Massachusetts, a small, dingy office at the Harvard Observatory became the birthplace of some of the most groundbreaking astronomical discoveries in history—all by female computers who earned less than 30 cents an hour—and sometimes nothing at all—to catalog stars whose images are captured on glass slides, all of them credited to male superiors.

Among them was Leavitt, a partially deaf woman obsessed with understanding the universe. Leavitt, played with delicacy and warmth by Sara Mackie, and her colleagues, Williamina Fleming (Kathy Welch) and Annie Cannon (Debra Lynn Hull), make up the "harem" of women working for astronomer Dr. Edward Pickering, a man they never see but who takes full credit for their work. His bumbling assistant, Peter Shaw (James Miller), routinely interrupts their work to be sure they haven't screwed anything up.

Despite her oppressive working conditions, Leavitt begins noticing a pattern among the Cepheid stars visible on her slides. But when she asks to get a better look through the telescope, she's repeatedly dismissed. Supported by Annie and

Williamina, and to the exclusion of all else, including her personal life, Leavitt eventually hits upon a scientific theory that will change the way humans think about the universe.

What's even more striking about Gunderson's play is how it shines a light on the age-old struggle—the expectation that a woman find a way to balance professional passions with personal relationships, romantic or otherwise, which even today lurks in every modern woman's periphery. And it illuminates a lie we're frequently told: that we should be happy with what we have, and that to ask for more would be selfish and impractical.

Accompanied by a haunting and emotional piano score, this RAT production is simply lovely. Mackie's Henrietta is inspiring yet approachable, and Hull and Welch add a touch of comic relief that keeps this slice of scientific history from ever growing dull. Also worthy of praise is the stage itself, which bears the heavenly artwork of Mackie herself, and a backdrop that reminds us that even though Leavitt's and her coworkers' feet are firmly planted on the floor of their cramped office, their heads are always in the stars.

Though Gunderson's play takes a liberties with the actual history, and it tends to run long while leaving other questions unanswered, it's a deeply affecting story that will leave you wondering what other females' accomplishments may still be hiding in the shadows of history, waiting to be told. □



Silent Sky

Silent Sky—written by Lauren Gunderson and directed by Doug A. Mishler—will be performed at Restless Artists Theatre, 295 20th St., Sparks, until May 19. Dates: May 9, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18 at 7:30 p.m.; May 12, 19 at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$15 in advance, \$20 at the door. Student, senior and military discounts are available. For information and to purchase tickets, visit rattheatre.org or call 525-3074.