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“Life of Galileo” an Epic Theater Battle: Science and Reason vs. Fear

BOZEMAN, Mont., September 24, 2018—Just 18 months ago in Bozeman, hundreds of people spent a sunny afternoon walking across town as part of the March for Science, billed as an event to “encourage the free exchange of scientific knowledge.”

Among the crowd, one young woman held up an immaculately printed sign that read, “Facts are stubborn things.”

In “Life of Galileo,” the 20th-century masterpiece by playwright Bertolt Brecht, the famous Renaissance scientist is obsessed with a view of the heavens by telescope—the first ever—and what it means for the 2,000-year-old concept of the universe with the Earth at its center. Galileo believes everyone, including the all-powerful Church, will understand that facts are facts.

“I believe in the human race,” Galileo says. “If anybody were to drop a stone and tell them that it didn’t fall, do you think they would keep quiet? The evidence of your own eyes is a very seductive thing. Sooner or later everyone must succumb to it.”

Not in Galileo’s lifetime.

In the 400 years since the Church silenced Galileo, it’s clear that science, religion, and politics are still grappling with questions that are far from resolved in the eyes of many, said Gordon Carpenter, director of “Life of Galileo” for Bozeman Actors Theatre. The company’s production of the play opens at the Museum of the Rockies on Friday, October 12.

Whether it be climate change, evolution, vaccinations, or even the shape of the planet amid a resurgence of flat Earth societies, scientific evidence and the “sooner or later” acceptance that Galileo expects haven’t completely embraced in our society, Carpenter said.

And yet, facts are stubborn things.

“Brecht first wrote this play as a reaction to Nazi oppression in his native Germany, and then revised it during the hysteria of the Red Scare in America,” Carpenter said. “Now look where we are today, when black is white and up is down and fear of the truth is rampant. We’re holding marches for science. Even 80 years after Brecht first wrote it, this play is still so relevant to our own time. It won’t go away.”

It's no coincidence that BAT will stage the play in a museum dedicated to science, Carpenter said. And to further promote the exchange of ideas, on-stage conversations with Montana State University scholars will follow each performance. "We hope to raise questions and create discussions after the audience leaves the theater," he added. "Why did these people think this way, and how have things changed or not changed?"

Over the course of the play's 14 artfully structured scenes, an already famous Galileo engages in a brutal struggle for freedom from authoritarian dogma. Unable to resist an appetite for scientific investigation, yet afraid of the Church's grave threats, Galileo publicly recants but continues to work in secrecy. In the BAT production, a cast of seven plays more than a dozen characters, each espousing arguments with overtones of life or death, heaven or hell.

This particular presentation of the play in the Museum of the Rockies, with a multimedia display of sight and sound and unique casting, would've pleased Brecht himself, said Gretchen Minton of MSU's Department of English. Minton, the production's dramaturg, explained that Brecht was a founder of the "epic theater" movement in which a play strives not for realism in story, set, and props, but instead presents loosely connected scenes of argumentation and analysis.

"Brecht loved to think dialectically, so what we get in this play is a series of binaries," Minton said. "Science vs. religion, reason vs. emotion, personal vs. political motivations, theory vs. practice, the state vs. the individual. We have to consider hard questions about these opposing forces, but there certainly aren't any easy answers."

Except, perhaps, for the stubborn fact that the Earth revolves around the Sun. "I think just about everyone in the audience can finally accept that one," she added.

"Life of Galileo" is the first play in Bozeman Actors Theatre's 2018-19 season, its 10th, dedicated to its late co-founder Dee Dee Van Zyl, who passed away earlier this year. The play features actors Aaron Schuerr, Alex Miller, Colton Swibold, Emily Jones, Hugh Burroughs, Kalen Watson, and Sydney Madill. Shows in the Hager Auditorium at the Museum of the Rockies will run October 12-14 and 19-21, beginning at 7:30 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. on Sundays. Tickets are \$20 for general admission or \$10 for students (with ID) and are available in advance at www.bozemanactorstheatre.org/tickets or at the door.

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