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Emily Yekikian

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## **The Revolution Will Be Zoomed: A Review of *The Revolutionists***

**Emily Yekikian**

With 2020 heralding the centennial anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote, it is praiseworthy that the Santa Clara Department of Theatre and Dance celebrated this momentous milestone by intentionally honoring women playwrights. Not only was their spring production, *The Revolutionists*, written by American playwright and short story author Lauren Gunderson, but it features an all-female cast. The cast is composed of three historical figures including Olympe de Gouges, Charlotte Corday, Marie Antionette, and a fourth composite figure named Marianne Angelle.

Before diving into the play itself, I must acknowledge the current situation we are living in due to COVID-19, which has prevented us all from being together. This means that this play was not performed using the traditional methods we would expect from a theatre production. Modern technology allowed the department to adapt this play intended for the stage into one fit for a virtual platform. I must applaud the actresses for their commitment to their craft. I am no actor, so I can only imagine how difficult it is to remain committed to character when one is acting via Zoom and not on stage. As much as I missed the atmosphere of an in-person production, the message of the play was not lost because the cast truly brought the audience into their story. Each actress occupied her own corner of the screen, emerging or exiting as needed. If you need help imagining the setup, think back to your last meeting or class on Zoom, and it looked just like that, with each character interacting with one another in the form of a discussion. Zoom setup aside, I will say that for a play centered around the French Revolution, I was surprised by the contemporary nature of the dialogue, which included colloquialisms and the occasional use of profanity. Though not representative of the vernacular of time, I

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appreciated it for the humor it added and sense of modernity it fostered.

*The Revolutionists* tells the story of community, resilience, encouragement, and truth with the theatre acting as a medium to capture and tell that truth. The play puts together four women of strikingly dissimilar backgrounds approaching the Revolution from contrasting perspectives. Though, over the course of the play they are able to humanize one another through their interactions. They find that their identity as women binds them together more than their differences can separate them. This emerging solidarity reveals to the women that they were collectively working toward something bigger than themselves. These four women found strength in hardship to create a history from which their voices were almost erased. The play touches on the themes of gender roles, politics, and art—all couched in the context of the French Revolution. More specifically, it is set during the notorious Terror of 1773.

Liberty. Equality. Fraternity. These are the commonly known ideals of the French Revolution. These ideals represented a society that had realized something was fundamentally wrong with traditional ways of government. Moreover, they represented an attempt to envision a totally new way of thinking and doing. It was radical. Yet, revolutionary men, however radical, neglected several other social issues that plagued their society. They skirted around the issues of inequality that women and people of color faced, which is where we see quite a few ironies arise. The first that comes to mind is that we have one of the most well-known revolutionary stories in our world's history demanding equality, fraternity, liberty, and so much more. Yet, those same revolutionaries do not extend those claims to women and people of color, as France still held slave colonies in Saint-Domingue, or present-day Haiti. Our second irony is that in this play Marianne Angelle is doubly excluded by her race and her ethnicity, though the Marianne of French history was a figurative white woman who served as the symbol of the Revolution. By making her a Haitian woman, however, the disconnect between the ideals of the

Revolution and the actions during it is made even more clear. This is a very clever and subtle tactic of the playwright. So, bravo Lauren Gunderson.

So much of our culture is expressed as well as preserved in our art. Theatre is culture and, in a sense, theatre is democratic. I'm no authority on the topic at hand, but plays do bring people together. There is a cast who tells a story, and there is an audience who watches, but everyone is engaging in some sort of dialogue. Often that dialogue is temporally and culturally specific. We can look to Lin Manuel Miranda's masterpiece, *Hamilton*, or this very play to clearly see that the representation and inclusion of historically marginalized voices are important topics to us as a society now. Plays can engage a mass of people in these types of dialogues and can affirm, change, or shift the conversations surrounding such topics. That seems quite democratic to me. As the play progresses, each character becomes increasingly consumed with a fear of dying—and, consequently, their stories dying with them. However, as they move through their journeys of activism, they come to realize that their fear of finality is misplaced. Their stories did not end with their deaths (all of whom are tragically executed by guillotine except Marianne). Instead, their stories begin with their execution, with the tales of their exemplary bravery living on today.

Still, as I watched this Zoom play, I could not help but be almost stunned at the parallels I could draw to our current political and civil climate. Both revolutions and pandemics are large disruptions in society, and these disruptions often highlight inequality. For example, women faced disenfranchisement while marginalized communities often lack sufficient health care and support. The bigger question, when looking at this from a historical perspective, is if these injustices will only be revealed and dealt with in times of distress, or will we remember that inequality exists every day and work to dismantle the systems that perpetuate these inequalities so for once, history may not repeat itself?