

REVIEW

An engaging 'Luminescence Dating'

- [Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

Monday, December 4, 2006



Luminescence Dating: Drama. By Carey Perloff. Directed by Mark Rucker. (Through Dec. 23. American Conservatory Theater and Magic Theatre, Building D, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco. One hour, 50 minutes. Tickets \$31-\$45. Call (415) 441-8822 or visit magictheatre.org).

The romance of archaeology gets entangled with the archaeology of romance in Carey Perloff's "Luminescence Dating," the new play by the American Conservatory Theater artistic director that opened Saturday at the Magic Theatre. Some of what Perloff and director Mark Rucker's talented cast dig up is contrived, some is intriguing and well dramatized. At its best, "Dating" combines plot and information so that it engages both the heart and mind.

That's the intent. "Dating" was commissioned by the Ensemble Studio Theatre/Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Project, set up to encourage the writing of plays about scientific subjects. Perloff's play, which hinges on determining the age of an artifact (through the process named in the title), opened at EST in New York last year.

Revised for its West Coast premiere, "Dating" is also the first full co-production by ACT and the Magic, each celebrating its 40th season this year. Which makes sense, given that Chris Smith was the EST/Sloan Project's founding program director before he became the Magic's artistic director.

The story of three archaeologists whose differing agendas converge on the same dig, "Dating" is more conventionally structured than Perloff's first play, "The Colossus of Rhodes." It's also more successful in integrating scientific matter and plot than any other EST/Sloan play I've seen, even if its three principals serve as obvious mouthpieces for their distinct methods.

ACT's René Augesen plays Angela Hart, who wears her emotional and feminist heart on her sleeve (and, in a nice touch, uses pencils as hairpins). As the play opens, a frustrated, tired Angela is burning the midnight lamps in an unnamed university basement lab-office (Erik Flatmo's perfectly appointed odd lot of desks, tables, shelves and file cabinets).

Angela is frazzled over her failure, after 15 years, to find out what happened to the great statue of Aphrodite by Praxiteles -- pictures of which adorn the set -- an object of intense worship that disappeared in the fourth century B.C. She's also more upset than she lets on, in Augesen's

expertly layered performance, over why her colleague and sometime lover Nigel (Stephen Barker Turner) left her Greek dig, without a word, to return to his own dig on Cyprus.

Nigel, who's English and a hard-line rationalist (Turner deftly conveys his difficulty with emotions without overstating the obvious), is wrapped up in his military-driven interpretation of ancient Greek civilization, and dismissive of Angela's goddess-centered approach. He has even less use for his former student Victor Reid's theories, based, as they are, more on reading (get it?) and intuition than field work. Played with sharp intelligence and a quick, catty wit by ACT's Gregory Wallace, Victor is a queer theorist for whom male love is the key to the Greeks.

Some of the elements in the setup are poorly explained. Is Angela working on anything or just hanging about? Why are she and Victor surprised to see Nigel when it turns out they share the same office? Why don't any of them question the identity of the strange, wizened cleaning woman?

The cleaning woman turns out to be a goddess metaphor in transformations well embodied by a commanding Ching Valdes-Aran, as Russell H. Champa's lights bathe the stage in pink and Chris Houston's score evokes mystical strains. Some of her involvement in the plot isn't fully developed, but she provides Perloff, a classicist at heart, a motive to weave quotations from Sappho (in Greek and English), Plato, Thucydides and Catullus into the dialogue.

Perloff does a good job of putting the science at the center of the clash over the mystery of the Cyprus dig -- which Nigel believes is the site of a puzzling massacre and Angela thinks was a temple to Aphrodite, complete with a contemporary replica of Praxiteles statue. The extent to which personal biases permeate interpretations is sharply depicted, though Nigel's motives, while perhaps too pat not to be true, are also too conveniently contrived.

Rucker and the actors fill out the characters and invest their interactions with levels of emotional depth that breathe life into otherwise underwritten developments. Even they can't make some of Perloff's more wooden lines ("I'll give you a week, you impossible woman") or ill-favored ones ("I can make grown women act like rabid dogs") work. But such lapses are allayed by the many well-turned phrases and acute one-liners throughout the script.

"Dating" falters in places, and turns a bit soap opera-ish, but it raises astute questions about the scientific approach. It also leaves you wondering what happened to that statue. And where is Aphrodite when we really need her?

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Archaeologist Angela Hart (René Augesen) examines the arm of a statue stolen by her friend Victor Reid (Gregory Wallace) in "Luminescence Dating" at American Conservatory Theater. American Conservatory Theater photo by David Wilson



David Wilson