

Notes from Fr. Nick

Galileo: A Rock Musical

Berkeley Repertory Theater's recent offering, *Galileo*, was a winner. It has the makings of a Broadway smash hit. Danny Strong's book is compelling, and there is a love interest. The music by Michael Weiner and Zoe Sarnak is arresting. Michael Mayer's direction is well paced, engaging and the choreography by David Newmann blended well into the story. I particularly found the sets and staging imaginative and powerful.

Most of us are familiar with the story of Galileo Galilei. By using the newly invented telescope, Galileo came to understand that our solar system is heliocentric; the earth and other planets revolve around the sun, rather than the earth being the universe's center. This observation ruptured people's understanding of their place in God's creation as much as Darwin's theory of evolution was to do a couple of centuries later.

While many prominent people were flummoxed by Galileo's explanation and denounced him, he had a powerful supporter in Cardinal Maffeo Barberini — that is, until Barberini became Pope Urban VIII. Influential Catholic leaders of the time feared that Galileo's discovery would aid the Protestant Reformation, and counseled Pope Urban to censure Galileo. Ultimately, Galileo caved into the Church's demands. Yet science continued its inexorable march, and the Church began to look more and more foolish. It was not until 1991 that a Pope — John Paul II — apologized for the condemnation of Galileo.



Madalynn Mathews and Raúl Esparza as Virginia and Galileo Galilei

Not everybody was taken by this new musical about Galileo. In his *Variety* review, Kevin Berne praised the play's special effects. And he wrote: "There are some attractive choral effects in Michael Wiener and Zoe Sarnak's score with a strong voice cast ably supported by Robert Sinha's eight pit musicians." But he also noted that "the central relationships are off." He found Galileo's daughter Virginia to be "stereotypically feisty," ahead-of-her-time. He alleged that some points made were "ham-fisted" or "snarky". In sum, "grafting '80's-style power ballads into the story of a Renaissance Visionary yields assertive but awkward results."

I came away from the play with a better impression Kevin Berne, but I wouldn't put *Galileo* in league with Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. *Galileo* glosses over the pathos created by the astronomer's discovery and panders to modern secular stereotypes. *A Man for All Seasons* grappled with Thomas Moore's intellectual struggle more deeply and was thoughtful about the role of conscience in making moral choices.

If you are able to see *Galileo*, I would recommend it. But the play made me feel a little sad — it is overly one-sided when it didn't need to be. The story is a little like finding out my favorite child is the school bully. I would know the whole child: I would see the good in him and recognize that his redeeming qualities more than make up for his faults. That is how I feel about the Roman Catholic Church.