

Review: Science, humanity, and the hunt for glory at Vt. Stage's 'Photograph 51'

Written by Brent Hallenbeck

It was the early 1950s, and science was moving faster than ever. In dank laboratories in Great Britain and America, teams of scientists were racing toward something small and obscure yet as big as life itself — the secrets of deoxyribonucleic acid, or DNA. The genetic code was being unlocked slowly but aggressively by competing groups, one of which included an unusual member in the early 1950s: a female scientist, Rosalind Franklin of Great Britain, who's the subject of the play "Photograph 51" that opened the 18th season Wednesday night for Vermont Stage. Opening night was also the debut of Cristina Alicea, the first woman ever to serve as producing artistic director of Burlington's professional theater company.

Alicea's tenure is off to a good start. The fact-based "Photograph 51" is clunky at first, with a cast of hard-to-like characters, but its crisp, intermission-less 90 minutes directed by Jim Gaylord move toward a dramatic conclusion driven not only by the race toward scientific truth but by the personality conflicts that get in the way of that truth.

From the moment she arrives, Franklin (played by Alexandra Hudson) engages in combat with the leader of her research team, Dr. Maurice Wilkins (Bruce Campbell). She's testy, but for good reason; she came to her job expecting to be Wilkins' partner and recoils at being given a secondary role. Most of the male scientists around her, Wilkins especially but also competitors James Watson (Benjamin Wiggins) and Francis Crick (John D. Alexander), have trouble getting past the fact that she's a woman to see that she's also a top-notch scientist. It's not until the cocky, ambitious Watson hears a presentation Franklin gives about her research — and then sees the photograph in the play's title that she took of exactly the helix that he's trying to hone in on — that he starts to take her seriously. But he also, as "Photograph 51" suggests, takes key elements of her work, which shoots Crick and Watson into scientific immortality and relegates Franklin to scientific obscurity.

Between the difficult characters and stilted scientific language, "Photograph 51" lurches into gear. It gets rolling when the science makes way for humanity. And while playwright Anna Ziegler makes Franklin a largely sympathetic character, the play works because Franklin is also not held above reproach. Could she have been a better scientist had she been better at working with others? Or could she have been a better scientist had she pulled even farther from the sexism and stonewalling Wilkins and the other men in her world continually threw in front of her?

Franklin is the focal point of the play, and while Hudson gives a forceful performance fitting her subject's personality, she never quite takes Franklin beyond her angry visage. It's a solid performance that could benefit from less bitterness and more focus. Wilkins is the real catalyst — his boorishness is at best a representation and at worst the specific reason Franklin never quite achieves the lasting fame her work warrants. Campbell delivers the production's most riveting performance, making the unlikable Wilkins at once curmudgeonly, clueless and amusing.

Alexander gives Crick a distinguished British gentility and Wiggins infuses Watson with a fidgety, nail-chewing roguish energy, but both actors slip in key elements of underlying sliminess in subtle but unmistakable doses. Two other characters are inserted into the play for obvious reasons — bumbling scientist Ray Gosling (Lane Gibson Jr.) for comic relief and young Ph. D. recipient Don Caspar (James Blanchard) as an admiring figure to draw bits of humanity out of Franklin. Both actors make their contributions while largely standing on the sidelines of the riveting maelstrom being spun by Franklin and her trio of antagonists.

The Vermont Stage production shines visually, thanks in part to clever use of slides of DNA photographs that illustrate the science yet set a haunting mood that hangs over the entire play. A highlight of the production comes from sound designer Martha Goode, who contributes minimalist, other-worldly effects echoing those from science-fiction films of the 1950s that lends appropriate historical resonance.

"Photograph 51" begins as a polemic about people searching for the secret of life from a scientific perspective and becomes a story of people missing the secret of life from a personal perspective. Cold hard facts spur the drama in "Photograph 51," but the more emotional, less tangible realms of the mind give it depth.