

Theater review: Scientists prove all-too-human

By Jim Lowe

BURLINGTON — “Photograph 51,” the title of the Anna Ziegler drama that just opened at Vermont Stage, refers to an X-ray crucial to the discovery of the structure of DNA. It also represents how a brilliant scientist — a woman — was done out of the credit she deserved for her part in the secret’s discovery.

Vermont Stage Company opened its 18th season as Burlington’s only full-time professional theater company with a production of this fascinating vignette of scientific history that proved intriguing, sometimes funny, sometimes touching, but always entertaining.

Rosalind Franklin (1920-1958) was a British scientist, Jewish and a woman, all of which were to prove important. After some mild career success, she was given a position at Kings College London in the biophysics department. But as her position turned out to be quite different, higher in fact, than her new colleagues were told to expect, relations in the lab were difficult from the beginning.



Alexandra Hudson plays scientist Rosalind Franklin in the Vermont Stage production of “Photograph 51.”

Franklin was also a rather severe woman, focused and determined, who didn’t suffer fools — or just about anyone else — gladly. Still, she was brilliant and her work was unique, and essential to the discovery of the structure of DNA.

Franklin’s work, though, was thorough and painstaking slow, in fact. That offered the opportunity for leaks to competitive scientists — who ultimately got credit and a Nobel Prize for it. (Posthumously, these scientists gave Franklin her due, but the Nobel, which came after her death at 37 of ovarian cancer, is never awarded posthumously.)

Ziegler’s enthralling 2008 play focuses on the human side of this tale, minimizing the technical side (fortunately for us techno-morons). Within that, it centers on the relationship between Franklin and her supposed partner Maurice Wilkins, actually a topnotch scientist who lacked the chutzpah to deal with his intense colleague-competitor. Seriousness in the lab is broken by the more light-hearted Ray Gosling, a Ph.D. student and Franklin’s research assistant.

Meanwhile, at Cambridge, scientists Francis Crick and James Watson, a young American whippersnapper, are vying to beat out their Kings College competitors — sometimes with the help of a personally miffed Wilkins.

Still, more than just a science horse race — with plenty of cheating — it’s a skewered love story. (It is important to note that Zeigler has adjusted the chronology for theatrical reasons, but the facts of the story are essentially true.)

Vermont Stage’s production, as seen Thursday, proved compelling theater. Directed by Jim Gaylord, it was spare, fast paced and well cast.

Alexandra Hudson was quite convincing as the severe Rosalind Franklin, made all the more credible by a particularly sympathetic and sensitive performance as Wilkins by Bruce Campbell. Lane Gibson Jr. was effective as the lightweight assistant Gosling.

John D. Alexander was wonderfully priggish as the scientist Crick, while Benjamin Wiggins was convincing but a little over-the-top as the arrogant young Watson. James Blanchard was also quite convincing as the earnest young American scientist Don Caspar. (A pivotal scene between Franklin and Caspar proved difficult to hear, in part because of Hudson’s accent.)

The staging was effective, given the FlynnSpace’s inherent awkwardness. Minimal but attractive set and costumes were by Jenny Fulton, lit by John B. Forbes, with atmospheric sound by Martha Goode.

Vermont Stage’s 2011-2012 season, under new Artistic Director Christina Alicea, is off to an auspicious beginning.