

# DC Theatre Reviews

By Tim Treanor

## An Experiment with an Air Pump

In the Joseph Wright painting, “Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump,” a Saint of Knowledge, his face rigid with scientific rapture, displays the results of his experiment. Around him, his apostles, family and friends gaze on in various expressions of certainty and satisfaction. To his left, a middle-aged man smugly explains the results to a young woman. To his right, a young couple smile knowingly at each other. In the middle, three girls on the cusp of womanhood look on in horror and dismay. Only we are clueless as to what happened. We see only a side-view of a thick-feathered wing. Is this all that is left of the bird? Did the bird survive the experiment? What *was* the experiment? A single candle illuminates the scene, casting a perfect circle of incandescent light; everything outside the circle is as dark as a black hole.

In the Shelagh Stephenson play, *An Experiment With An Air Pump*, produced by the Journeyman Theater and playing now through January 28 at the Clark Street Playhouse, extended human families both at the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment and in the present day struggle to hold onto their fragile values on the face of scientific certainty’s appeal. The bombastic Dr. Joseph Fenwick (Andy Brownstein) – who opens the play by reenacting the eponymous experiment – is convinced that the scientific discoveries he and others are making will revolutionize society, politics and government. Even though the most important discoveries of the time seem to deal with teeth and pimples, Fenwick and his disciples, Roget (yes, *that* Roget, played by Michael Paolantonio) and the odious Armstrong (Matt Dunphy) believe with messianic fervor that as the world slips into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they hold the future of man in their hands. Fenwick’s righteous certitude allows him to ignore the needs of his wife, Suzannah (Becky Peters), who finds her own path to rapture and enlightenment in brandy and strong red wine.

Flash-forward two hundred years, and we see, in the dining hall of the same Newcastle mansion, the brilliant geneticist Ellen (Peters again) pondering an opportunity to do research on pre-embryonic cell clusters. Her husband Tom (Brownstein again), recently laid off from his university post, recoils at the moral implications of the work, and Ellen’s own feelings are unclear to her. Only to Ellen’s friend Kate (Tara Garwood, who also plays the Fenwick’s passionately skeptical daughter, Harriet) is the matter unambiguous, as she prattles fecklessly about plucking schizophrenics, manic depressives and other defectives from the population before they are born.

The play shifts between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries as it moves forward. Good science is humble, and acknowledges complexity and ambiguity, but these scientists are too enchanted with the possibility of glory to pay mind to the wisdom of human history. “After they’re dead, they’re just meat,” Armstrong says in justification of body-snatching for experimental purposes, at once neatly dismissing the Resurrection of the Body in an epigram and distancing himself from his human brothers. Two centuries later, the credulous electrician Phil (Dunphy again) remembers his manic-depressive uncle, who would never have been born under the scientific rules that Ellen and Kate are preparing to promulgate. “He was magic,” he says.

Stephenson powerfully but gently disentangles the assumptions which underlie arrogance, both scientific and personal. It is an enormously ambitious play, and in the hands of a master like Stoppard (to whom she is often, perhaps unfairly, compared) or Carol Churchill the point might have been made with searing precision. Stephenson is subtler and less focused. Indeed, some of the play’s early dialogue, particularly in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century portion, seemed familiar and unnecessary, and the actors seemed uncomfortable delivering it. But as the play moved on, it was impossible not to be drawn into its great compassionate heart.

The performances, which included Bette Cassatt as the Fenwick’s manipulative daughter Maria, were uniformly excellent. Of particular note were the four actors who took on dual roles. They, and particularly Dunphy and Brownstein, gave credit to two roles which were completely different from each other.

But the most remarkable part of the evening was an astonishing performance by the luminous Lindsay Allen, who played the Fenwick’s hunchbacked servant, Isobel. Allen, who radiated pain, dignity and intelligence with every economical movement, elevated the performance of everyone around her and gave this play its human dimension.

*Wed & Thurs @ 7:30 pm  
Fri & Sat @ 8:00 pm  
Sat @ 2:00 pm  
(tickets are \$15-\$20)*

*Clark Street Playhouse  
601 S. Clark Street,  
Arlington (Crystal City), VA*

*Written by Shelagh Stephenson.*

*Directed by Gregg Henry. Music composed by Jesse Terrill. Set Design: Jacob Muehlhausen, Costume Design: Debra Kim Sivigny, Property Design: Brenden McDougal, Lighting Design: David C. Ghatan, Sound Design: Randy Lancelot, Lindsay Miller (stage manager). Cast: Lindsay Allen, Andy Brownstein, Bette Cassatt, Matt Dunphy, Tara Garwood, Michael Paolantonio, Becky Peters.*