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By Bob Anthony

An Experiment with an Air Pump

Turn in all of your future theater tickets in exchange for ones for the sterling production by the Jouneymen Theater at Clark Street Playhouse of Shelagh Stephenson's "An Experiment With An Air Pump". With a Tom Stoppard corollary intermingled plot of 1799 and 1999, it tells the tale of social science and experimental science successes and, mostly, failures. It has all of the superb humorous bent of a Stoppard play but playwright Stephenson is truly a linguistic genius as appreciated in the character of Roget (of the Thesaurus) and she even throws in the charming Whorfian hypothesis of why cultures need multiple words for items that are important for their survival. There is never a dull moment of intellectual thought and emotional display throughout the hour and a half. The cast of seven (also a significant number) are the most engaging of any present play and the skilled actors are magnificent especially those in period double roles. Only Bette Cassatt and Michael Paolantonio (his star is on the rise) are single cast as Maria and Roget but they are similarly stunning. Most talented Becky Peters plays the wife, Andy Brownstein plays the willful husband, Tara Garwood plays the impetuous daughter and scientist employer, and Matt Dunphy plays the antagonist and is a riot in the second role of Phil who lives on hearsay and thrice denies science and medicine. But, as noted above in "critic's choices", Lindsay Allen is genius as the hunchbacked servant who "tears out one guts" with a most convincing portrayal of repression and alienation due to her infirmity. Director Gregg Henry gave a wonderful pace and complete understanding to the science involved from "body snatching" to "embryo snatching" in the two stories. David C. Ghatan allowed some darkened lighting to highlight the underlying mystery of the house setting. Jacob Muehlhausen and Debra Kim Sivigny were faultless in the set design and costumes. The whole technical crew, presumably on a tight budget, gave wonderful time and place to the action. This is a highly recommended show that should garner many award nominations. (To 1/28) (Reviewed by Bob Anthony)