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A Possible Farewell To the Stage's Journeymen

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This weekend is your last chance to catch "An Experiment with an Air Pump," the unique and thought-provoking play now onstage by Journeymen Theater Ensemble. Unless county officials act soon, it may be a while before you see this promising, two-year-old troupe performing again in Arlington, its departure being part of the fallout from the scheduled razing of its current home, the crumbling Clark Street Playhouse.

It would be a shame to miss this drama -- a mystery, a story of illicit love and a study of the moral dilemmas of science. It would be a bigger shame if the county let this group escape to the District, where it faces getting lost among numerous smaller companies vying for space and attention in an increasingly competitive atmosphere.

Shelagh Stephenson's play is bold, absorbing and sometimes funny as it leaps back and forth between centuries. The title comes from Joseph Wright's 18th-century painting in which a group of people watch a "scientific" experiment about vacuums and in which a bird's life is at stake. The English scientist's daughter is horrified because her single-minded father has appropriated her pet dove for his demonstration.

Stephenson sets the story in an English country house in 1799 and 1999, tying the centuries together with a mystery and linking the issues involved in scientific advances of yore with modern concerns about genetic manipulation. As 1799 gives way to 1800, the English countryside is uneasy with political and social strife. Science poses moral quandaries, especially as progress in science is frequently accompanied by grave-robbing. Joseph Fenwick (played by Andy Brownstein) is a revolutionary thinker, and as he tries to exert control over his bored, wine-addled wife, Susannah (Becky Peters), his rambunctious children and his assorted scheming associates, he sees science as a tool to impose order on the universe. Meanwhile, the household abounds with conspiracies, including a liaison between Isobel (Lindsay Allen), the eccentric, deformed maid, and Armstrong (Matt Dunphy), a scientist who lacks a moral compass. The skullduggery of the past causes a modern-day mystery.

In 1999, on the eve of the new millennium, Tom and Ellen are preparing to move, having found that their old place, which has been in Ellen's family for centuries, is too difficult to maintain. The husband is an underachiever and the wife a scientist. Her field, genetic research, is rife with moral, political and social considerations. Stephenson carefully avoids point-counterpoint framing of the issues as she subtly weaves medical and scientific ethics, sex, love and the role of women at home and at work, allowing them to flow naturally with discussions and action.

Director Gregg Henry has faithfully maintained Stephenson's vision, preparing a lucid and direct presentation of the material without resorting to the easy melodrama that could quickly bog down the effort. Peters and Brownstein adroitly make the switch in eras and gender roles, both avoiding stereotypical coloring of characters as either ruthless or passive. Allen is colorfully entertaining as the unfortunate maid, combining a quietly comic tone with sensitive pathos, while Dunphy makes a remarkable transformation from the cold, rapacious scientist of old to a modern contractor with an open, perhaps even empty, mind. It's fun and fascinating.

Journeymen Theater is a rare entity. It is committed to a faith-based approach but eschews evangelism and raises issues involving personal choice through compelling theater. Arlington County is taking over the space that Signature Theatre, a Shirlington-based troupe and one of the top-ranked theater companies in the region, is vacating later this year, making it available for at least two groups. Let's hope the county adds Journeymen to that list before it's too late.

"An Experiment with an Air Pump," performed by Journeymen Theater Ensemble, concludes this weekend at Clark Street Playhouse, 601 S. Clark St., in Crystal City. Showtimes are 7:30 p.m. today, 8 p.m. tomorrow, and 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday. For tickets and information, visit <http://www.journeymentheater.org> or call 202-248-2295.