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By Bob Mondello

An Experiment with an Air Pump

By Shelagh Stephenson
Directed by Gregg Henry
Produced by Journeymen Theater
At Clark Street Playhouse to Jan. 28

A successful screenwriter—who shall remain nameless only because I can't remember her name, not because I wouldn't love to hold her up to ridicule—once looked at me blankly when I called a plot device "Stoppardian." The name stumped her. She didn't know who Albee and Wilde were, either, and I remember thinking that I'd stumbled across an explanation of why film writing is so frequently pedestrian—a notion reinforced when, talking about the same plot device, the screenwriter referenced Ally McBeal.

On the evidence of Journeymen Theater's smart, intellectually engaging An Experiment With an Air Pump, I'm going to hazard a guess that playwright Shelagh Stephenson knows who Tom Stoppard is—and has maybe even studied his work pretty closely. Her play, which unfolds in both 1799 and 1999 in a country house in Newcastle, inhabited in both eras by scientists, is a nifty variation on Stoppard's time-bending, scholar-tweaking comedy Arcadia, with a bit of body-snatching and feminism added in.

Stephenson's play takes its inspiration from Joseph Wright of Derby's 1768 painting An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump, in which a crowd gathers around a bell jar as a scientist pumps out air to test whether the cockatoo trapped inside can survive in a vacuum. The painting is also an inspiration for Ellen (Becky Peters), a contemporary genetics researcher who describes how, as a child, she recognized a kindred spirit in the scientist, depicted by Wright as illuminated by a strange glow that originates from somewhere within his work. He is, she says, "a man beatified by his search for truth."

Behind her, illuminated by a similar glow, are figures surrounding a real bell jar, and when Ellen dons a period gown to join them as Susannah, the wife of the onstage scientist, they come to life, bickering about the fate of the bird. The 18th-century women are mostly appalled at the cruelty of scientific method, which has appropriated a child's pet for this experiment, while the various men seem resigned to a bit of moral rule-bending in pursuit of knowledge.

One of them, a physician-in-training named Armstrong (Matt Dunphy), thinks nothing of studying cadavers stolen from local graveyards, or of indulging in social subterfuge if it will gain him access to an interesting ailment. Susannah's husband, Fenwick (Andy Brownstein), dismisses restraint of all kinds as "the dead hand of caution" and responds to his family's panic at the sound of rioting in the streets with a blithe "the greatest tonic in the world is the sound of institutions tumbling." Only the list-making Roget (yes, that one, played with note pad in hand by Michael Paolantonio) exhibits any qualms about the legality and ethics of digging up bodies for experimentation or expresses reservations about the notion that the purpose of scientists is to change the world. Shouldn't that be "understand the world?" he wonders. But the others pay him little heed.

The bustling Fenwick household—nicely evoked in dark woods and latticed windows by designer Jacob Muehlhausen—is one in which women are mostly decorative. Susannah tries to drink away her resentment about her husband's absorption in his experiments. Foot-stamping daughter Harriet (Tara Garwood), who'd really like to do some experimenting herself, is encouraged instead to write plays about scientific progress. Her simpering sibling, Maria (Bette Cassatt), stays within social bounds by occupying herself with nothing more challenging than penning love letters to her fiancé. Isobel, a hunchbacked Scottish servant (Lindsay Allen), bridles at being treated as if she were an idiot—she startles Roget by coming up with 27 synonyms for "servitude"—but research is in this household clearly a male enterprise.

Whenever the action shifts from 1799 to 1999, the gender roles reverse but the stakes (and even the issues) aren't all that different. Ellen's work as a geneticist involves pre-embryos, a neat other-end-of-life match for the corpses unearthed for medical experiments two centuries earlier. Her bosses are women dedicated to finding commercial applications for her research—and to arguing, much as their male predecessors did, whether discovery is neutral, whether, as one suggests, "ethics should be left to philosophy or religion." The contemporary men include a dithering handyman (Dunphy), who believes firmly in reincarnation and alien abduction, and Ellen's hubby, Tom (Brownstein), who has just been RIF'd as a humanities prof and argues that genetic engineering, however well-intentioned, will be a moral and practical disaster. ("James Joyce probably had the gene for schizophrenia," he says. "It's a continuum—poetry at one end and, at the other, confusion.")

Tom understandably feels as extraneous to his wife's career as Susannah did to her husband's. Patterns repeat. Arguments get reframed. And as the evening progresses, a dark secret surfaces, linking the play's two eras and the two families who have inhabited the house.

If you've seen Arcadia, all of this doubtless sounds familiar. But though An Experiment With an Air Pump mimics a number of that play's devices—including the era-bridging trauma—Stephenson isn't the wordsmith Stoppard is. Nor does she hesitate to employ stereotypes—cold-blooded scientists, warm-hearted poets and servants—or to flirt with melodrama. But she's provided her characters with some vivid, emotionally complex set pieces to play with, and the Journeymen cast attacks them enthusiastically. Allen is particularly affecting, her stooped domestic lackey seeming essentially comic at first but gradually emerging as a persuasively wrenching figure. And Paolantonio's Roget makes nice work of a vitriolic tirade in which the character's list-making ability pays off rhetorically—especially given how easily the moment could have played as a joke.

Elsewhere in the period sequences, Gregg Henry's staging makes a stronger case for the play's scholarly debates than for the romantic yearnings that inflect them. The protective impulses of the men, the coquettish impulses of the wife and daughters, are all played more as personality traits than as behavior grounded in social convention. And issues unrelated to the scientists end up seeming entirely irrelevant—if there's a thematic rationale for interrupting the play's action with Maria's letters to her increasingly distant fiancé, for example, it escapes me. (For the record, I caught the show's first official performance—not technically a preview, but earlier than critics were expected, and the folks playing the experimenters were themselves still experimenting a bit.)

The contemporary part of the puzzle feels more nuanced and integrated, partly because the arguments about scientific inquiry and the ethics of embryonic research are familiar enough that Stephenson needs only to sketch them in, and partly because the performers find more space between the lines to link the personal and professional lives of the characters. Marital trade-offs figure prominently in both halves of the story, but the emotional compromises of Tom and Ellen register more forcefully than those of Fenwick and Susannah. Still, as Journeymen's mounting establishes, the play is deft enough to draw an audience into its investigation—especially if no one minds a bit of trial and error.

The double-casting/double-era tactic, incidentally, has been downright trendy of late. It was used in Draft Day, last month's world premiere that satirically blended a slave auction with a pro-basketball draft. And the device will surface again later this month in Michael Winterbottom's film Tristram Shandy: A Cock & Bull Story, in which performers play not just the characters in Laurence Sterne's novel, but also themselves as actors making the movie. So maybe that screenwriter will get wind of it yet. **CP**