

An Experiment With An Air Pump - Shelagh Stephenson

Directed by Sam Chittenden - 19-27 April 2024

AUDITION NOTICE

Auditions: 9 Dec 4-6 pm, 10 Dec 4-7 pm. Call backs: 12 Dec 6-9 pm

Initial read through and workshops: 7 & 13 Jan

Rehearsals from mid Feb. Run 19-27 April in the upstairs theatre.

One grand house is occupied by two families both teetering on the edge of change:

1799 - On the eve of a new century, the house buzzes with scientific experiments, furtive romance and farcical amateur dramatics;

1999 - In a world of scientific chaos, cloning and genetic engineering, the cellar of the same house reveals a dark secret buried for 200 years.

This extraordinary play presents some great creative opportunities for cast and crew alike. There is doubling across the two time periods, with modern and period costume/set. We will also be using shifts in physicality and voice, along with a soundscape and special effects, to convey the shifts in time.

This will be my 6th full length production at NVT. I am a collaborative director, who loves to explore. I am looking for hard working team players and naturalistic performers who are excited by character work and want to bring their ideas into the rehearsal room.

PLOT

The plot takes place in the same house in two different time periods divided by the gap of two hundred years (1799 and 1999). The play questions the basic principles of scientific (medical) research, such as the right of the scientist to cross ethical limits: the right to perform dissection on the recently deceased (1799) and use of embryos in stem-cell research (1999).

Both years are symbolic—they stand at the turns of new centuries and have to face the challenges the new times are about to bring. There will be a great development in medicine in the 19th and of genetics in the 21st centuries.

The play also implicitly deals with gender roles and questions the stereotypes of women scientists. While in 1799, it is the father (Fenwick) who is the enlightened soul and his male friends are also scientists (Armstrong, the physician, and Roget, the to-be-author of the thesaurus), his wife (Susannah) is a stereotypical wife of the time and their two daughters (Maria and Harriet) are expected to be such, too. The decision of one of them to become a scientist leads to disapproval. In 1999, the roles somehow change: Ellen, the wife, is the geneticist, and her husband, Tom, is a historian. Ellen's friend, Kate, is also a young genetic researcher. There are also two "uneducated" characters: Isobel, the 1799 maid, and Phil, the 1999 handyman. An additional theme of this play involves the ethics of using human life, in any form, for the advancement of science.

Besides the general questions about a scientist's responsibilities and limits, the play is in part a detective story. In the modern times, a skeleton is found in the basement. The skipping between the two time periods highlights, then resolves, questions about the identity of the corpse and the means of their death.

CASTING / DOUBLING

CHARACTER	PLAYING AGE
Joseph Fenwick (1799) Tom (1999)	M, 55
Susannah Fenwick (1799) Ellen (1999)	F, 40
Harriet Fenwick (1799) Kate (1999)	F, 20s
Isobel Bridie (1799)	F, 25
Maria Fenwick (1799)	F, 20
Peter Mark Roget (1799)	M, 21
Thomas Armstrong (1799) Phil (1999)	M, 20s

CHARACTERS

Dr. Joseph Fenwick (1799) - a radical physician who believes that republicanism is the way forward. He has a fairly cynical view of the world and is a scientist because he "want[s] to change the world".

Susannah Fenwick (1799) - the wife of Joseph Fenwick. She is, in some respects, the 1799 equivalent of Tom, with a passion for reading, poetry and art. Susannah overcomes issues with her husband about love and respect throughout the play, though it is clear she drinks heavily and relies upon childish behaviour to gain the attention she so desperately requires.

Harriet Fenwick (1799) - the daughter of Joseph and Susannah Fenwick and the sister of Maria. She admires her Father but loses her temper easily.

Maria Fenwick (1799) - Maria is also the daughter of Joseph and Susannah Fenwick and is the sister of Harriet. She always wants to be the centre of attention and is in constant competition with Harriet to see who can be the better daughter. She is engaged to a character who is never seen on stage called Edward.

Peter Mark Roget (1799) - Roget is the only character in the play based on a real person- the creator of Roget's Thesaurus. In the play, he is a character in whom an inward moral battle rages about the ethics of science, though he maintains that he is a scientist because he wants to "understand the society".

Thomas Armstrong (1799) - Armstrong is a cold, ruthless physician who is particularly interested with the structure of the human body. He is staying with the Fenwicks after Dr. Farleigh (a character not seen) persuades Dr. Fenwick to "take him on for three months".

Isobel Bridie (1799) - Isobel is the maid of the Fenwick household. She is originally from lowland Scotland and has a hunchback. Although timid, Isobel has a passion for words and it is evident that she is an intelligent, though self-conscious person.

Ellen (1999) - Ellen is a geneticist who is being persuaded to take a job that is being offered to her from Kate's company.

Tom (1999) - Tom is Ellen's husband and is an English lecturer but he has been made redundant. He is depressed and has concerns about Ellen's job.

Phil (1999) - Phil is a geordie building surveyor who is surveying Ellen and Tom's house which they are planning to sell. He offers human compassion and comic relief in the play.

Kate (1999) - Kate is Ellen's friend/fellow geneticist who offers her a job at her company. She is in direct conflict with Tom for most of the play as they both have opposing views on the conduct and morality of scientific exploration.

To book an audition slot and get a copy of the script, or to find out more, contact me on sam@different-theatre.com

NB Anyone can audition for an NVT production,
but cast members will need to become members if not already