

# Brock theatre returns

BY RYAN MAITLAND  
Staff Writer

Those of you who have seen the giant banner across Thistle Complex hall proclaiming the arrival of an "experiment with an air pump" may have been confused why the science department would bother to advertise their latest research. Those of you who actually read the poster will have realized that what it really announces is the arrival of the latest production of Brock theatre.

Brought to you by the Brock University Department of Dramatic Arts, *Experiment with an Air Pump* is a play by British playwright Shelagh Stephenson inspired by an 18th century painting of the same name. Like the painting, the play revolves around the human reaction to science, and the potentially life changing innovations that science leads to. Containing scenes from both the 18th century world depicted by the painting, the modern world of computers, and genetic manipulation. *Experiment with an Air Pump* raises issue with the pace of technological change in society and its impact on social consciousness.

Of course, this seems like pretty hard work for a playwright perhaps best described as a comedy writer. During my interview with director, and theatre professor Gyllian Raby, I was very surprised to hear that Stephenson is most widely known for her "Best Comedy" Olivier Award-winning play *The Memory of Water*.

"[Shelagh Stephenson's plays] illustrate the combination of intellect and humour," says Raby. "[For example], *The Memory of Water* is a comedy about a funeral." She goes on to explain how *Experiment* is a genre-crossing play, taking characteristics of the epic, comedy, social criticism, and even mystery to deliver its message.

"*Experiment with an Air Pump* is a challenging play, but full of humour," Raby says. "It contains quite intellectual jokes, and the actors have had to learn the details behind the humour. They have had to figure out how to deliver the jokes in a way that all audience members can relate to."

In particular, the lead actors



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**Theatre of science** Brock theatre presents *Experiment with an Air Pump*.

(Lauren Kennedy and Douglas Ledingham) have had to work to reconcile the two time periods the play is based in. Both Kennedy and Ledingham play double roles, one based in the modern world the drama begins in, and another in the scenes from the 18th century.

Raby explains further, "More than just quick costume changes, the dual time scheme of the play requires a shift in perspective from the two actors, from today's attitudes to those values represented by the painting."

Beyond the actors, a similar quick switch is required on the stage to reflect both the current and enlightenment periods. While the two time periods of the play are nominally based in the same house, the set must reflect the changes that have been made over the course of two centuries. This is achieved through the use of a "light box" set design. This works by constructing the walls of the set out of stretched canvas instead

of wood and changing the lighting to suit the time. When the canvas is lit from the front, it reveals the cream colour paint of the house in the 20th century. However, when the lights behind the canvas are turned on the colours painted on the back show through, giving the appearance of a whole new set.

When it comes to the technical aspects of the play, Raby has had a lot of help. With both personal and company ties to the Shaw festival, she has been able to enlist the aid of several people normally found working for the popular festival. The head of scenic arts, the sound designer, and the rigging expert of the Shaw Festival have all made appearances to help with the layout of the set and sound effects.

"I am going to owe a lot of favours after this," Raby admits somewhat ruefully.

*Experiment with an Air Pump* shows Nov. 7, 8 and 9 at 8:00 p.m. in the Sean O'Sullivan Theater of the Center for the Arts, Brock University.