



**B**rock University's School of Fine and Performing Arts is opening its Theatre Alive! season with a play that shows signs of a multiple personality disorder. But instead of these voices conspiring against one another, the ideas explored in Shelagh Stephenson's "An Experiment with an Air Pump" work together harmoniously.

To illustrate, this is a play which takes place in two different time periods, but set in the same room. It's also an extremely thought-provoking story that alternates between tragedy and comedy quite frequently, according to director Gyllian Raby.

"It's about the mythology of science and issues pertaining to genetic technology," says Raby, who also teaches in Brock's drama department. "It looks at the ways that scientists practice science. But it's also a play with a great deal of humour and emotional intelligence. It's wonderful as a vehicle for students to work on because it's so dimensional."

Each year students choose two productions to stage, where they "put everything into them and devote hundreds of hours." Prof. Raby insists that offering an eclectic season helps to keep things fresh.

"We like to do plays that matter; that have either really affected the way theatre is viewed, or that have been acknowledged as classics because of their ideas," she says.

The award-winning An Experiment with an Air Pump takes its title and inspiration from a 1767 painting by Joseph Wright. This artist's work often depicted scientific or industrial subjects. In this case the painter captured a scene demonstrating how life

cannot exist in a vacuum. "We put the painting on our [promotional] poster because I'm very concerned that it's an awkward-sounding title unless you've seen the painting," Raby explains. "So what the playwright has done is bring that painting to life. All the characters from the painting also come to life in the play. We learn about their attitudes toward science and their relationship with the Enlightenment period, which said that knowledge can free the world. That's what's explored."

To prepare for the show, students researched and discussed ideas brought up by Stephenson's text, such as medical ethics and comparisons between historic and modern scientific beliefs. Raby says that, from a director's point of view, learning the mechanics and style of the play, along with comic timing skills and "emotional sensibility" were integral in achieving a balanced portrayal. In addition to the on-stage roles, the production also features an extensive behind-the-scenes crew, including sets and costumes designed by Karyn McCallum, head of Scenic Arts at the Shaw Festival.

Ideally Raby hopes An Experiment with an Air Pump will provoke serious debate, rather than try to persuade audiences of one sole opinion. So like a case of multiple personalities, this play doesn't establish any single voice as the true victor, but all the characters contribute to form a larger picture.

"As the play progresses, the difference between time periods becomes blurred," Raby says. "In the very final scene, we're not actually sure whether we're in 1799 or 1999. And it doesn't really matter. Therefore, the scene, more importantly, is about a man and a woman looking at a new century and resolving to survive it with as much integrity as they can."

[BY KATYA DIAKOW]

AN EXPERIMENT WITH AN AIR PUMP  
 WRITTEN BY SHELAGH STEPHENSON  
 DIRECTED BY GYLLIAN RABY  
 PLAYING NOVEMBER 7, 8, 9  
 AT SEAN O'SULLIVAN THEATRE  
 AT BROCK UNIVERSITY  
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