



INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

What gave you the inspiration to create “The Man Who Discovered That Women Lay Eggs”?

I read a comment in a book called *Sophie’s World* about 10 years ago that, due to the influence of the ideas of Aristotle, people had thought that women were just places for men to plant their seeds, and that it was only in 1826 that Karl Von Baer discovered otherwise. I thought this was such an important fact that would have shaped so many things about women’s lives that I decided to use it as a starting point for the play.

So did you want to make a feminist piece?

I think that word is such a loaded one these days that it’s hard to use and have it mean the same to everyone, but I would say that I wanted to create a piece that explored and questioned the history of women but that wasn’t anti-men. I think in the past few decades there has been a feeling that anything that was about women was likely to make men feel guilty just for being male, and whilst there were a lot of things that definitely needed to be said and acknowledged, I made a very conscious decision to make sure that this play was something which would appeal to men and women equally. That was why I decided to work with a male writer and also why we balanced the gender of the group we worked with during the research project as well.

Why was it so important to work with scientists?

Because we were artists with hardly any scientific knowledge! We were really aware that a lot of our assumptions about the way discoveries or theories were made were based on vague notions, and that to create anything really meaningful we would need to have our facts straight from the start. So we did lots and lots of reading of books, which we would never normally have touched but actually really enjoyed (like “The History Of Embryology, by Joseph Newman) before we even met them, and then when we did meet we knew what we wanted to pursue further.

Did you find that that you were approaching the work from very different viewpoints?

Yes- but actually these viewpoints weren’t the stereotyped Artist vs Scientist ones you might expect. Often, we would say “but we can’t show it that way, because that wouldn’t be scientifically accurate”, and they would remind us that this wasn’t science we were creating, but art, and we could therefore do what we wanted. I know they all said they really enjoyed the freedom to think in this way, they were really good at giving us ideas to work on, and they were a really encouraging audience for the work we produced, which you need when you’re working with an unfamiliar subject.

How did you go about creating a script from the work?

We had created scenes from scenarios that our research suggested. For example, when we read that Leeuwenhoek was very careful to point out that he had obtained the sperm for his experiments from normal intercourse with his wife, we immediately imagined that scene in the bedroom. The most difficult thing was deciding what to leave out, though, and I think this is the problem when you really get into the research. There are so many good stories that you really want to tell, and also ideologically you have to decide what you will be saying by your decisions about what to leave in. We struggled for ages with the fact that there are so few women scientists represented in the play, when actually our research did come up with some interesting characters. However, we felt that to include more than we have would show an unbalanced view of the history of gynaecology, and that there is a really big point to be made by showing that it has been almost exclusively men who have created the theories and treatments that were used on women.



Leeuwenhoek

Another point was that we recognized that not every story or character is concerned with the egg, but past theories on conception were so tied up with female sexual pleasure, orgasm, and comparisons of male and female genitalia that it was impossible (and far less interesting!) to stick to that one issue anyway.

Are the characters all real people, then?

Most are, or, in the case of the Midwife, John and Mary, they represent the experiences of people who would have existed. Vesalius and the four scientists (De Graaf, Swammerdam, Spallanzani and Leeuwenhoek) really thought and did the things they say and do in the play, and Aristotle's lines are based on his own ideas, too. The fictional characters are the ones in Von Baer's world. We were so shocked when we discovered the reason why vibrators were invented that we felt compelled to bring a thread of that into the story, and that feeling created the Veronica character. I think her situation shows how disastrously scientific theories can go wrong, and it provides a good contrast with the silliness of some of the other scenes.

Why did you choose to make her a puppet? And why did you use so many puppets generally?



Vesalius & Priest

My main interest theatrically is how actors and masks and puppets can interact with each other onstage, and so all of Full Beam's shows have played with this kind of combination. For this show, though, I think the distance provided by a puppet or mask means audiences will more easily accept scenes which are quite graphic, and also more generally, it was a convenient way to jump between different times and places from the main part of the play. In the original version of the play, Veronica was a life-sized puppet, and Augusta played by an actress, because I thought there were too many inferred meanings in having them smaller than Von Baer (though the fact that Veronica was a puppet was a metaphor for her not being treated like a human being by the other humans). However, I think they do work a lot better smaller, and Veronica's size means she can flit around and be irritating, but also be extremely vulnerable, which makes the ending far more dramatic. The small puppets are either extremely powerful (like the priest) or totally lacking power in this play, and I think it

could be said that an extreme of size in comparison to the other characters often translates like that onstage...it could have worked in a similar way if they'd been huge.

What about Von Baer - why did you choose for him to remain silent?

Again, in the first version of the play it was different and he had a lot of lines, but we felt that in some places this made the scenes too wordy. He was always the character that connected with the audience, though, and I was interested in exploring how this connection could work without words. Rob, who has played Von Baer in both versions, has some great facial expressions and I think this gave me the hunch that it would be effective. We played around with some of the scenes, and decided that this idea that he was constantly being disturbed from his work and had no real connection with what was going on around him was really strong when he didn't speak. It also raises the question of his responsibility for what happens to Veronica - is it that no one hears him or that he is too absorbed to notice? Non-speaking performers often elicit a similar response from the audience as puppets do, in that they generate a very warm response, so it's interesting to play with that and show that even the protagonist isn't perfect.

It sounds as if the play has been revamped quite a bit. How have you and the writer managed that?

Adam and my roles have overlapped a lot from the start, in that we both did the research and created scene content, plot devices, alternative endings, etc, and then later we both came up with solutions for staging the play during rehearsal. He has been very tolerant of my more and more drastic editing of lines, (a difficult part of the director's job), and I have had him in rehearsal throughout, which a lot of directors don't do, but which I have always found really useful. We both know what the other one means because we've been working on it from the start, so, whilst I think it's definitely important to define your own roles and work to your strengths, I believe we have created a better piece by working this way. He's performing in the show this time round, and doing just as great a job there!

So, what do you hope your audiences will take away from this show?



Aristotle

I hope they will have enjoyed themselves, and I know there is plenty to laugh about in the play, but I hope as well, they will have lots of questions that make them have a really juicy conversation with their friends afterwards. A lot of the things that are shown in the play are really distant from our culture now (like the midwife giving Mary an orgasm, or the idea that you can prove a theory through the quality of your argument rather than through fact or examples) so people are often quite intrigued by them. I hope it makes people question ideas of what science and fact might be, too.

Theatrically, I hope to show that the combinations of mask, puppet and performer have heaps of potential. There is a lot of brilliant puppetry out there that is funny or quirky or looks beautiful, but I think that this combination can also be used to communicate quite complex or serious ideas, which is done less often. I believe we have managed to do a bit of both.

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