

# INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

These resource materials are intended to enhance your students' experience and understanding of The Man Who Discovered That Women Lay Eggs. There is a range of different activities for you to explore in the classroom both before and after the performance.

The resources are primarily aimed at students aged 16+. Please do adapt them to other purposes as you see fit.

## COMPANY BACKGROUND

Mixing live performance with unusual puppets, inventive design and evocative music, their work is among the most innovative of the new generation of theatre companies in the south west"

- Bath Chronicle

"Fantastically stunning visual theatre that you need to see."

- BBC Radio Bristol

"this bizarre mix of puppetry, masks and live action does exactly what it says on the tin."

- The Stage



*Don't Play With Your Food*

Full Beam Visual Theatre is a small touring puppet theatre company based in Bristol in the South West of England. It was set up in 1999 by our Artistic Director Lizzie Philps. After reading drama at Exeter University, Lizzie lived in New Zealand, devising and touring one-woman puppet shows. She is currently Performing Arts Course Leader at Filton College in Bristol. Lizzie has also worked for Volcano Theatre, Them Wifies, Aardman Animations and the BBC. Since forming Full Beam Visual Theatre, she has co-devised, made puppets for and performed in or directed all our shows. The other half of Full Beam is Rachel McNally. She has produced all Full Beam's shows and made bits of puppets for most of them!. In

addition, she freelances in marketing and research and has worked for the British Film Commission and The Countryside Agency. From time to time, she gives talks about health & safety in theatre, marketing and touring theatre to students at Filton College. Full Beam Visual Theatre aims: to re-define puppetry as an art form that can provoke and inspire an adult audience; to create theatre that is new and surprising; to produce theatre that plays to all the senses, that is rich in texture and meaning and has a real sense of fun. Mixing live performance with unusual puppets, inventive design and evocative music, the work ranges from commissioned plays and devised productions to adaptations of classic texts.

The combination of different theatrical media including puppetry, mask and mime underpins Full Beam Visual Theatre's claim to create theatre that is a visual feast and food for thought.

For more information about Full Beam Visual Theatre please go to our website [www.fullbeamvisualtheatre.org.uk](http://www.fullbeamvisualtheatre.org.uk)

In this pack are materials and ideas aimed at students of either BND Performing Arts course or AS level Theatre Studies (particularly questions relating to performances seen - DRA 3 on the AQA syllabus). The contents can be used following the order and activities in which they are presented here, or you may adapt or pick from what is offered.

### Outcomes

- Activities will enable students:
- to form their own opinions with which to evaluate the play from all angles and thus to answer typical exam questions;
- to use the play as a starting point for devising, or both.

The director's interview and design activities could also be used before students view the show, and then referred back to afterwards.

## 1. INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

*This gives an overview of the devising and creative process, and discusses the aims of the piece. Students can either read the whole interview themselves, or each read part alone and then feedback to the others. You could use some of the questions below before they read, or to stimulate discussion afterwards.*

- What were the director's aims, and do you think she achieved them?
- One elderly female reviewer said that the show "made me weak-stomached and embarrassed". Do you share her views? Why might the show have a limited appeal to some age groups, and do you think this is important for a company to consider?
- Do you think the show is equally interesting to male and female audiences? Is it interesting for different reasons?
- Do you share the director's ideas about the effectiveness of puppets? How might the show have been different if done with actors only?
- What evidence can you think of from the show that demonstrates the devising process described by the director? How do you think the show might be different if it had been all mimed, or a pre-written script?
- Do you think the scientific content was presented in an interesting way? What do you think about the director's implication that scientists and artists might be trained to think differently?

## 2. SYNOPSIS

*This tells the story of the play (including giving away the ending!) in the format that the play is performed in, and as such can be used as a useful memory trigger after watching the show. Students might find it useful to refer to when thinking of examples, and also as an example of how briefly the action can be described before going on to analyse it. Example questions using the synopsis might include:*

- Compare the structure of the play with a typical plot structure (You may like to use a typical Hollywood film to illustrate this).
- Where were the peaks in dramatic tension/the points of catharsis / denouement / resolution?
- Did these exist in the self-contained scenes as well as in the main story of the play?

- How did the fact that the main story was punctuated by these scenes affect the structure?
- Some points in the story were told through words, others were shown. What examples can you think of each, and how effectively do you think this was done?
- What events in the story had a particular emotional impact on you? How was this achieved - through words, or timing, or spatial dynamics, or music, or something else?
- How were atmospheres of tension or conflict created between characters? Think of examples where this created humour, and other examples where it was more serious.
- Think of some of the minor characters, and their function in the play. What, for example, was the role of George in moving the plot forward? How did their physical or vocal characterisation support their role?
- What was the journey that the key characters went on, and how was this shown? How were they changed by the end? What connections or comparisons could you make between characters from different times?

### 3. EXAM QUESTIONS AND PLANS FOR ANSWERS

The exercises above will have prepared students well towards an articulation of a theatrical rather than plot-based response to the piece. The suggested plans are only one of many possible ways of answering the questions, and are intended to guide learners towards creating a clearly structured argument rather than dictate one viewpoint.

#### Suggestions For Use

Ask students in pairs or groups to discuss and mind-map the question first, before giving them the plans. They can then fit their own examples and ideas into the structure given, or use it to check for points they might have missed in their own answer.

A supportive class could be divided into groups, each group answering a different question without having seen the plans. The learners then swap answers and use the plans as a sort of checklist against which to mark each other's work.



## 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.

## SYNOPSIS

Karl Von Baer is “The Man Who Discovered That Women Lay Eggs”, and our play begins with him excitedly preparing his laboratory for work. He is a man with a mission and nothing - not even the chatter of his wife Augusta and constant visitor George, or the impending arrival of his troublesome sister-in-law Veronica -is going to distract him. The only voice he appears to pay any attention to is that of the harassing Aristotle, who has spent the last 2000 years watching other scientists attempting to make discoveries whilst constantly referring back to the work that he did, and who warns Von Baer that he is wasting his time.



*Karl von Baer*

Von Baer’s painstaking process of observation continues to be disrupted by his awareness of the past, and the views held or discounted by individuals at various stages in history are introduced through a series of self-contained scenes interspersed throughout the play.

First we meet the illiterate midwife, Jane, whose folk remedies for infertility are much more practical than those of the local priest, and include bringing a woman to orgasm in order to allow her to “release her seed”, which, it was believed, would mix with the man’s seed to eventually turn into a child in the womb. In an allusion to the millions of women persecuted by the church in the middle ages, Jane is accused, after a successful delivery, of causing another birth to go horribly wrong, and is banished, to be replaced by educated male doctors, whose practices are sanctioned by the church.

When we return to Von Baer’s laboratory, Aristotle warns him that the church might be no more positive about this egg idea that they were to the midwife - reminding him that thought has always needed to be approved by the church before being presented as “fact”. We meet Veronica for the first time, whose curiosity about the nature of her brother-in-law’s work causes him evident embarrassment. George appears to have all the solutions to make her behaviour more acceptable, though, and suggests horse riding as a way to help her “lose some vigour” .



*Will & Bill*

Two grave-robbing skeletons introduce the work and ideas of the time of Vesalius now, as they attempt to steal the body of a female criminal to be used for dissection and study. Vesalius’ artist, Vincenzo, is proud of his anatomical drawings, but his reluctance to draw the genitalia of a woman forces Vesalius to come up with another idea. His suggestion that a woman’s vagina is simply a penis turned inside out because of a lack of the heat that would make it emerge fits well with the theories of the church, and Father Perruti, who has the final say as to whether or not Vesalius’ ideas can be published, approves.

We find Veronica having a sneaky look around Von Baer’s study next. When caught, she is told in no uncertain terms by Augusta that her behaviour demonstrates that there is something wrong with her which, if left untreated, means no-one will want her as a wife. Von Baer is exhausted by the stress of his situation and has had enough of his work, too. As if that wasn’t enough, Aristotle seems determined to make him aware of how important his own discoveries were and to rubbish Von Baer’s newfangled scientific methods.

The advent of science and the need to prove ideas through more than just the quality of one’s argument is the theme for the next scene, where three well-to-do natural philosophers, De Graaf, Swammerdam and Spallanzani and a down-at-heel draper (Leeuwenhoek - who also

invented the microscope in his spare time) meet to discuss their theories and convince each other as to whose is best. There is much conjecture as to whether an egg exists, and if so, what the different roles of egg and sperm are in the process of generation of the foetus, but none of them seem to be interested in the role the clitoris plays in getting things going... except, that is, Mrs Leeuwenhoek. She is very keen to advance her husband's knowledge in that area, but he has other ideas about the function of sex. After all, how else can he obtain the sperm for his experiments in an age where masturbation is so frowned upon?

We return to Von Baer's laboratory to find him, in a frustrated state, searching through his papers, with a feeling that the elusive egg is only just out of reach. His enthusiasm for demonstrating the wonders of the microscope is quashed when Aristotle asks why he hasn't found his eggs with such good equipment. Von Baer is so dispirited he barely notices George and Augusta's decision to try a new "treatment" on Veronica to calm her down... and when she starts asking awkward questions about the human body he has acquired, he allows Dr Probinski to explain.

Veronica is given the first of a series of treatments using the vibrator machine, which Dr Probinski assures George is perfectly safe, and will relieve her of the tension that unmarried women can experience. They ignore her pleas to stop, and instead focus on discussing the wonders of the contraption.

Finally, Von Baer finds what he has been searching for, and is ecstatic, - if only for a short while. Although he gains some satisfaction from having proved Aristotle wrong, this is tempered by Veronica's subdued reaction to his discovery, which is confusingly different from her normal behaviour. George and Augusta are delighted, however, though their excitement is partly due to the fact that Augusta is pregnant. They go off to open a bottle of champagne, leaving Von Baer with suspicions about who the egg he now knows his wife would have produced was fertilized by...



*Dr Probinski & The  
Vibrator*

## EXAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS & PLANS FOR ANSWERS

*With reference to a play you have seen, describe what you believe to be the director's intentions and discuss how effectively you believe these were fulfilled.*

*One possible way of answering this question would be to identify a selection of intentions and deal with each in turn, as below.*

**To Entertain** The nature of the topic provides lots of scope for jokes, both textual and visual (give examples). You may wish to discuss whether you found the humour to be tasteful, and give a reason for this opinion. Entertainment isn't just comedy, though - you may also like to consider the rapport that Von Baer had with the audience, or the pace and delivery of the plot. How much of your enjoyment came from interest in the content? Were there places where this was particularly well expressed, or did you find the play too didactic?

**To Experiment** with combinations of puppets, masks and performers. You may like to divide this section into two, and deal with the Von Baer scenes, which had a live but silent actor performing alongside table-top puppets, separately from the historical scenes, which usually had a combination of mask and "muppet-style" puppets. Elements to consider when evaluating these combinations might include: the spatial relationships created (who "owned" and moved freely in the space, and who was more restricted? How did this reflect their status in the scene?); the differences in movement, size and operation that puppets and masked performers have and whether this was put to use practically or artistically; and the effect on the audience of using puppets instead of live performers - think of a dramatic moment (such as the use of the vibrator machine on Veronica) to support your point here.

**To Discuss** the ways that women's lives have been shaped by scientific ideas. It may be a good idea to pick a couple of female characters that were particularly interesting for you - contrasting ones would be best. Make sure you don't just tell the story, but mention how these characters' dramatization (the way they spoke, moved, used the space, etc) supported the portrayal of their circumstances. You might also like to talk more generally about the themes of the piece, and how it made you feel about the lives of women in the past. Do you think the director achieved her intention of making a play for both sexes?

**To Encourage** audiences to ask questions about science. You could address this aim with a comment on your own attitude to science, which may or may not have been confirmed by the play. A lot of scientific information was conveyed in the play, and not all of this was in the dialogue - how else did the director show these ideas? Were there any parts of the play that you didn't understand? You may wish to consider whether this was because the staging or dramatization was unclear or because they were outside our cultural reference (e.g.: midwives giving women an orgasm) In conclusion, did you learn anything about science from the show, or did you make any parallels with scientific thought today?

*Discuss the visual elements of one play you have seen, and evaluate how they were used to communicate the themes of the piece.*

*Don't forget that "visual elements" includes everything that you can see - so this means that use of space, physical movement and even facial expressions can be included in your answer.*

You might like to start by describing the practicalities of the performance space itself - what was the relationship between it and the audience's space? Was there a "fourth wall"? What was the effect when this was broken? How was the stage laid out - where were the entrances and exits, and how did their place affect the action? (e.g.: Aristotle could enter unseen and look over Von Baer's shoulder). There were three tables, all of which were used to provide differing levels in the Von Baer scenes and also as performance spaces in their own right - you could give examples here of how this was achieved and how effective you thought this was. How did the same space change when occupied by a puppet or by a person?

You could continue to talk about the way the visual elements communicated the setting and themes of the play. For example, the set was very minimal at the start, but the colours and shapes were intended to show the Victorian era in which the play was set. The set was fairly naturalistic, except for the table legs. What effect did these facts have on your expectations for the piece? By the end of the play, Von Baer's laboratory was full of props from scenes from the past. What did that communicate?

The props, masks and puppets could be divided up in a number of ways - you could deal with each scene separately, but it might be easier to avoid telling the story if you talk generally about each, with a few specific examples. Was there an overall style to the puppets and to the props? (This could include their colour, shape, way of operation, etc.) What was the effect when the puppets became props (e.g.: the skeletons and the scientist busts)?

The play dealt with several different times and places, and this might be a good way to mention Lighting and Costume, as their primary task was to show a different era or setting from Von Baer's.

Lighting especially was kept quite simple, as this show tours to venues with very few lighting facilities, but you might like to comment on the way even very simple lighting can be used to create an atmosphere.

Did the costumes give you an accurate idea of who the wearer was and when they lived? Were the costumes an important part of -or comment on the action (think about the small priest's very long cassock, or Mrs Leeuwenhoek's nightdress, or the design and shape of Veronica and Augusta's dresses) ? What about the black costumes of the performers - were they entirely neutral or did they suggest a particular era?

Finally, you should mention the physical movement of the actors and the puppets, as this contributes significantly to your view of a play. You could start by describing Von Baer's behaviour when alone and comparing it with the way he holds himself when other people are present - what does this tell us about how he feels about his work or other people? Von Baer has a strong relationship with the audience, even though he doesn't speak. How is this achieved, and how effective was it? The puppets also told us something about themselves by the way they moved - you could compare Veronica's flitting around with the very heavy, solid movement of the scientists, for example. Perhaps also you might like to consider the presence of the operators and whether or not you found this distracting.

To sum up, you might like to give your opinion on the piece overall, balancing the positive and negative comments to give a final assessment. Was there any visual image that affected you particularly strongly, or that has inspired you?

*Analyse the relationship with the audience of one performance that you have seen, and justify your reaction to the piece.*

*This is a fairly broad question, as all of the elements of a piece of theatre will be designed to communicate to the audience in some way. However, here are some of the main ideas from this production that could be considered more relevant to a question of this type.*

The most obvious place to start is with Von Baer, as he is the protagonist of the piece, and it is only he who explicitly acknowledges the presence of the audience. He does this with "looks" - can you give an example of a place where this was particularly funny, or tragic? The audience are the only ones who see his true personality, as his behaviour changes when other characters are in the room. How does this make the audience feel- do we like him more or less, and why? The choice not to allow Von Baer to speak relies on the audience's ability to imagine what he might be saying or thinking, both about the other characters and about science (such as when he explains the use of the microscope to Aristotle). Did you find this a problem at all?

Continuing on the theme of imagination, the audience is asked to suspend their disbelief and imagine that the puppeteers are not there. How difficult was this to do? Did interest in the practicalities of operation add to or detract from your enjoyment of the piece? Some of the staging of the puppets played a game with the audience by acknowledging their "puppetness" - for example, some had no legs, or used puppeteers' legs, or glided instead of walking. Was this effective or did you feel something was "not right"?

The use of puppets also affects our involvement in the characters and their experiences. You might like to consider how easily an audience would accept some of the action if it had been staged with actors instead, or whether you found the fates of Mary (the midwife)'s or Veronica's emotionally affecting.

The domestic plot is told in episodes, which requires the audience to follow a broken storyline interspersed with completely separate and self-contained scenes. Music from the eras shown was used to signal to the audience the time period of the episode to come - did the use of music help with this, and if so, how?

The play could be described as didactic, as it contained a lot of scientific information and references, which may have affected the audience enjoyment of the piece. Was it possible for different audience members to engage with it at different levels? What helped this to happen? You may also wish to consider whether any parts of the play might offend some audience members.

An effective ending to this essay might be to describe the atmosphere in the auditorium after the play. The reactions you experienced are the most immediate and truthful. What were people's expressions - were they smiling and laughing, or solemn? What did you and your friends say to each other about the piece afterwards? Was the piece cathartic or frustrating?

## C) DESIGN DISCUSSION POINTS

What was your first impression of the set? How soon did you notice that the table legs were women's legs and genitalia and how did this affect your expectations of the show? In Victorian times, table legs were covered with tablecloths as they were thought to be too suggestive to be shown. What point do you think we might have been making by showing them in this way, and how does this connect with the stories in the play?

What elements of the set do you think reflected the era that the play was set in? Our aim was to suggest a laboratory in Von Baer's house, but also to refer to large institutions which advocate a certain type of learning and knowledge. Did you notice any parts of the set or any props which showed these ideas?

The process of dissection in reality is messy, but we chose to represent the animals that Von Baer dissected with two-dimensional cut-outs. Why do you think that was, and how do you think the show might have been different if we had used more life-like representations?

Some of the most powerful characters in the play were represented by the smallest puppets. How do you think the differences in size between puppet and mask characters affected the way they were seen by the audience? What other combinations might have been effective, and what practical considerations do you think affected our decisions?

Some of the puppets were objects as well as characters, e.g.: three of the scientists were busts. What did the objects the characters were made of say about the character themselves? Did the way you viewed the puppets that became objects change in any way when they were no longer being operated?



*Von Baer & Aristotle*

Photos by Paul Silverthorn

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