

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 whom the egg he now knows his wife would have produced was fertilized by...



*Dr Probinski & The
Vibrator*

Photos by Paul Silverthorn

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