

CONNECTING CREATIONS
Science-Technology-Literature-Arts

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SCIENCE-IN-THEATER:

From Oxygen

Carl Djerassi and Roald Hoffmann

The play Oxygen is headed for American, Swedish, and British productions in 2001. The authors' discussion and presentation of excerpts from it here is an avant-première. Editor's note.

Science is inherently dramatic – at least in the opinion of scientists – because it deals with the new and unexpected. But does it follow that scientists are dramatic personae? Or that science can become the stuff of drama? Until now, “science-in-theater” has proved to be a rare genre, although playwrights of the caliber of Brecht, Dürrenmatt, Whitemore, and Stoppard have on occasion chosen scientists or scientific themes as components for the plots of major plays.

A more recent phenomenon of the London theater scene is the appearance of “pure” science-in-theater plays by prominent playwrights who are not scientists. Steven Poliakoff's *Blinded by the Sun* attempted to illuminate some of the idiosyncratic aspects of a scientist's drive for name recognition as well as the competitive aspects of a collegial enterprise through a theatrical version of the chemical “cold fusion” debacle of the early 1990s. Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* calls upon quantum mechanics and the uncertainty principle for much of the scintillating interplay during a wartime encounter in Copenhagen between two physicists, Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, under the skeptical eye of Bohr's wife. Although Frayn made no concession to scientific illiteracy, the play still became a major West End theatrical success.

But can science-in-theater also fulfill an effective pedagogic function on the stage, or are pedagogy and drama antithetical? Must pedagogic motivation be an automatic kiss of death when writing for the commercial theater? “Didactic,” other than “boring,” is usually the most damning term used by a reviewer to drive a prospective audience from a given play. Is that because the dictionary definition of the term is “designed or intended to teach” and that common wisdom tells us that a theatergoing public abhors being taught?

However, *Webster's Dictionary* contains also an expanded definition of “didactic,” namely, “intended to convey instruction and information, *as well as pleasure and entertainment*” (emphasis added). We have attempted to accomplish both aims in a science-in-the-

