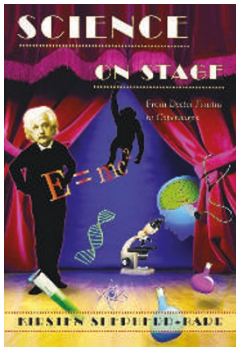


# Theatre of science



## SCIENCE ON STAGE: FROM DOCTOR FAUSTUS TO COPENHAGEN BY KIRSTEN SHEPHERD-BARR

Princeton Univ. Press: 2006. 264 pp. \$29.95

Over the past decade or so, science has been on stage as never before. Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* (1998), which dramatized the wartime meeting between Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr, is perhaps the most celebrated example; but Tom Stoppard had been exploring scientific themes for some time in *Hapgood* (1988) and *Arcadia* (1993), and Margaret Edison's *Wit* (1998) and David Auburn's *Proof* (2001) were both Pulitzer prize-winning Broadway hits, the latter now also a Hollywood movie. There are plenty of other examples.

Although this 'culturization' of science has largely been welcomed by scientists — it certainly suggests that theatre has a more sophisticated relationship with science than that typified by the 'mad scientist' of cinematic tradition — there has been a curious lack of insightful discussion of the trend. Thank goodness, then, for Kirsten Shepherd-Barr's book. It represents the first sustained, serious attempt that I have seen to engage with the questions posed by science in theatre. In particular, although there has been plenty of vague talk about pedagogical opportunities, about Snow's two cultures and about whether the 'facts are right', Shepherd-Barr explores what matters most about 'science plays': how they work (or not) as theatre.

Despite the book's subtitle, it does not really try to offer a comprehensive historical account of science in theatre. It is arguably stretching the point to include Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* (of around 1594), despite its alchemical content, because this retelling of a popular folk legend is largely a morality tale that can be understood fully only in the context of its times. But although that is equally true of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (~1610), both plays are important in terms of the archetypes they helped establish for the dramatic scientist: as arrogant Promethean man and as wily charlatan. There are echoes of both in the doctors of Ibsen's plays, for example.

More significant for the modern trend is Bertolt Brecht's *Life of Galileo* (1938/45) — a far more nuanced look at the moral dilemmas

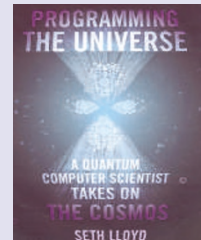
that scientists face. Like *Copenhagen*, *Galileo* has drawn criticism from some scientists and science historians over the issue of historical accuracy. Some of these criticisms simply betray an infantile need to sustain Galileo as the heroic champion of rationalism in the face of church dogma. That is bad history too, but then, scientists are notorious (or should be) for their lack of real interest in history, as opposed to anecdote. Here Shepherd-Barr is admirably clear and patient, explaining that *Copenhagen* "takes history simply as material for creating theatre that does what art in general does: poses questions."

Shepherd-Barr negotiates admirably around the gaps that arise from the differing demands of art and science. Perhaps her key insight is that the most successful science plays are those that don't just talk about their themes but embody them, as when the action of *Arcadia* reveals the thermodynamic unidirectionality of time. But most importantly, she reminds us that theatre is primarily not about words or ideas, but performance. That's why theatre is so much stronger and more exciting a vehicle for dealing with scientific themes than film (which almost always does it miserably) or even literature. Good theatre, whatever its topic, doesn't just engage but involves its audience: it is an experiment in which the presence of the observer is critical. Brecht pointed that out; but it is perhaps in theatre's experimental forms, such as those pioneered by Jacques Lecoq and Peter Brook and exemplified in John Barrow and Luca Ronconi's *Infinites* and Theatre de Complicite's *Mnemonic*, that we see how much richer it can be than the removed, ponderous literalness of film. What could be more scientific-spirited than this experimental approach? When science has given us such extraordinary new perspectives on the world, surely theatre should be able to do more than simply show us people talking about it.

**Philip Ball**

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