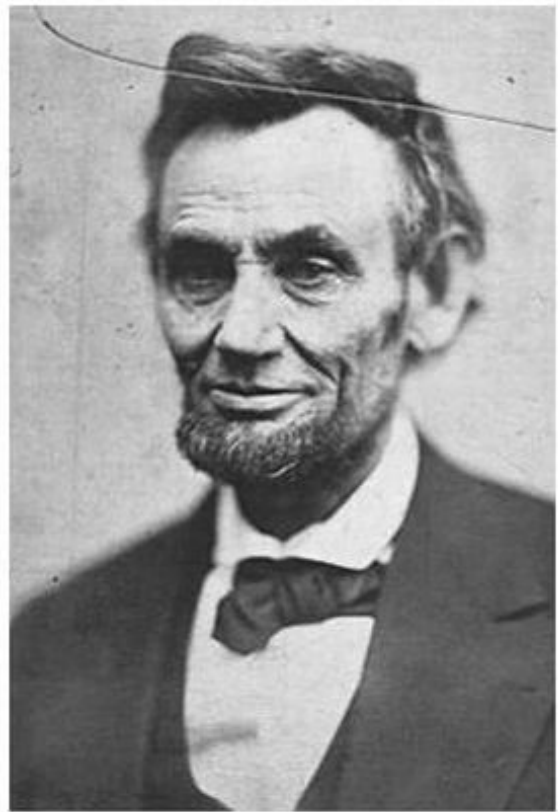
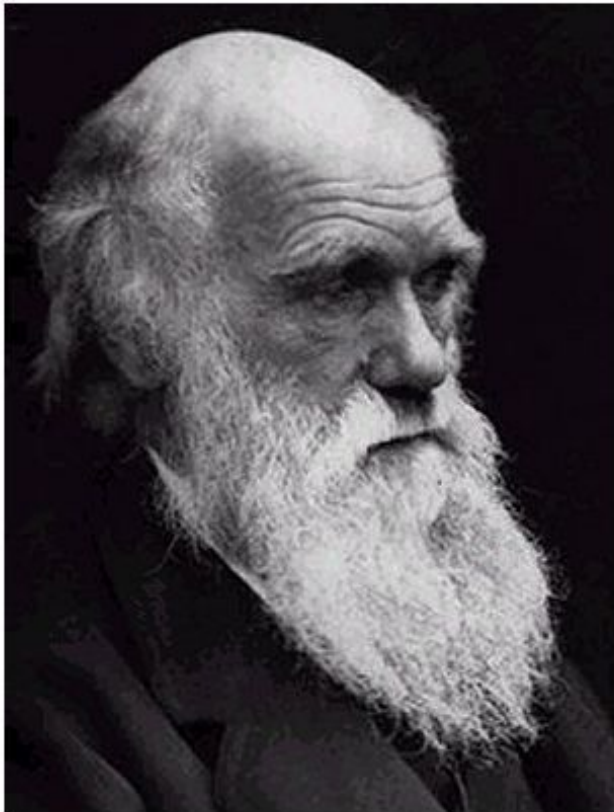


THE DENVER POST NEW-PLAY SAMPLER SERIES

Theatre Company of Lafayette
presents:

**"Separated at Birth: The
Lincoln/Darwin Plays"**



This commissioned project by eight local playwrights commemorates the 200th birthdays of Lincoln and Darwin, both on Feb. 12, 1809.

Leroy Leonard's full-length play "Monkey Men," about a long-ago scandal involving evolution's missing link, will alternate nights

with an evening of seven original short plays cumulatively titled, "Abe and Chuck (Way) Off Broadway." One of The Denver Posts' "top 10 to watch" for winter 2009.

*Mary Miller Theater, 300 E. Simpson St.
720-209-2154 or www.tclstage.org*

"The Debate"

By Donald R. Fried

Synopsis

It is July, 1860, a month after the famous debates at Oxford on evolution and natural selection. Charles and Emma Darwin are at their home, outside London. Thomas Huxley, who represented the ill Darwin at the debates, comes to visit Darwin to relate the events of the debate. Huxley, prides himself as being "Darwin's Bulldog," immediately attacking everyone who does not agree to the validity of the evolution and natural selection theories. Darwin realizes the potential danger to society of the theories and tries to convince Huxley of the wisdom of being patient and trying harder to fit into the scientific world and society at large.

Characters

Charles Darwin: Age 51. Playful and a bit mischievous. Nonetheless, he is a dedicated lifelong scientist, and is painfully aware of the social and political implications of his discoveries. He is trying to deal "responsibly" deal with them.

Thomas Huxley: Age 35. Darwin's protégé. But where Darwin is cautious, Huxley is convinced that science has no room for caution, and the best approach is to immediately make known all scientific discoveries and to immediately attack anyone whom he feels is in error.

Emma Darwin: Charles's wife. Age 52. Darwin's wife. She too is playful, but she is devoutly religious and concerned that Darwin's agnosticism may prevent him from taking his place beside her in heaven.

Set

The library / sitting room of Charles and Emma Darwin's house in Downe, Kent, southeast of London. There is a desk, some

bookshelves and several chairs. There are piles of papers and manuscripts strewn about, as well as a number of biological samples and "experiments" -- trays of soil and pots with identical climbing plants.

The Debate

LIGHTS UP: MID AFTERNOON

(Charles is examining a tray of soil. He dips out small samples of the soil into test tubes, puts drops of some kind of chemical into them, shakes them, looks at the color, makes notes in a notebook, etc. He speaks to the trays.)

CHARLES

Ah, Bishop Wilberforce, how good of you to visit. I know it's rather a long way for an earthworm. Allow me to present Mr. Owen. But of course, you two have already met.

(He looks shocked.)

Mr. Owen, what are you doing to the Bishop? Quickly, Mrs. Dunwitty, cover the children's eyes.

(Meanwhile Emma has entered.)

EMMA

I didn't think earthworms had eyes.

CHARLES

No, they don't. And that's fortunate, because otherwise their behavior would be a constant source of embarrassment to each other. Have you ever seen an earthworm blush? Neither have I, but I can't imagine it's a pretty sight. It must have been bred out of them over the eons.

EMMA

(Looking in the tray.)

Which one's Mrs. Dunwitty?

CHARLES

Why the one in the white pinafore, pushing the pram, of course.

EMMA

Of course. Imagine me not noticing that.

CHARLES

I do have the benefit of having spent most of the last 30 years staring at tiny things. Speaking of which, where are the children?

EMMA

I had Mary and Etty take the little ones to the park.

CHARLES

Just in case, huh?

EMMA

I know watching the worms always gets you excited, but I wasn't talking about that. I meant in case the discussion this afternoon results in bloodshed.

CHARLES

Bloodshed! ... Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, huh?

EMMA

You do what you feel you have to. It's just that if you and I can't manage to discuss it without fighting, what chance is there with others?

CHARLES

Well, they don't have as much at stake as you do.

(She looks at him inquisitively.)

I mean they're not worried about spending eternity in heaven waiting for me to finish my sentence in purgatory, are they?

EMMA

I wish you wouldn't joke about it.

CHARLES

Sorry. It's just that we've been at this for so long there doesn't seem to be much point discussing it seriously.

(Beat.)

You know I have to try.

EMMA

Yes, I know.

(There is a knock on a door offstage and Emma looks at the clock.)

That must be Thomas.

(Emma exits. Charles immediately becomes distracted by the climbing plants. Emma re-enters, accompanied by Thomas. She is carrying a tray with a teapot and three cups which she puts on the table.)

THOMAS

Charles, it's great to see you.

CHARLES

(With emotion.)

Thomas.

(Charles comes to him and embraces him. They are both overcome with emotion. Emma is moved, but to hide it, she pours tea into two of the cups.)

EMMA

(To Charles as she starts to leave.)

Call me if you need anything. It's wonderful seeing you again, Thomas.

THOMAS

You too, Emma. But aren't you going to join us?
(She looks at him quizzically.)

EMMA

No ...

(Thomas picks up the empty teacup and waves it at her. Emma and Charles look at each other for an instant.)

EMMA

Oh, that. I thought I might, but I've changed my mind. You two have so much to talk about, and I'd just be in the way.

THOMAS

But I'll see you again before I leave, won't I?

EMMA

Of course.

(She exits.)

CHARLES

Thanks for coming to visit a sick old man.

THOMAS

Not so old, and hopefully not so sick.

(Beat.)

How are you?

CHARLES

I can still work -- most of the time. That's what's important. But you didn't come all this way to talk about headaches and heart palpitations. Tell me about Oxford.

THOMAS

I would have thought you'd know everything about it by now.

CHARLES

The papers are useless for that sort of thing. And even if I were up to having company, nobody comes to visit us out here. Besides, nobody has the flair for drama that you do.

THOMAS

So where do you want me to begin?

CHARLES

How did it start? The conference wasn't supposed to be about natural selection.

THOMAS

No, but it's on everybody's mind, so we were bound to get onto it sooner or later. On the first afternoon there was a paper presented on sexuality in plants, and of course it referred to your work on nearly every page. Owen waited until the presentation was finished, and then, under the guise of asking a question, he got up to spout his usual creationist bunk.

(Imitating a pompous academic.)

"I find it amazing that Mr. Darwin's 'disciples' persist in ignoring the importance of the 'continuous operation of the ordained becoming of living things.'

CHARLES

'Ordained becoming of living things.' He won't be satisfied until that makes it into the encyclopedia with his name next to it.

THOMAS

He's just jealous of the attention you're getting.

CHARLES

Certainly.

THOMAS

And the fact that it prevents him from stealing your work and claiming it as his own.

CHARLES

That's a bit harsh. Probably true, but a bit harsh. As gentlemen we should be able to deal civilly with everyone, and as scientists we have to be open to learn from everyone as well.

THOMAS

We have nothing to learn from Owen.

CHARLES

Come now, he's a distinguished scientist.

THOMAS

That's rubbish and you know it. He's a waste of time and space.

CHARLES

My father taught me that if you're a good enough observer you can learn from everyone and everything, no matter how beneath your attention they may seem at first.

THOMAS

Uh oh. I'm in store for a tale of homespun wisdom, aren't I?

CHARLES

Yes, I'm afraid you are.

THOMAS

OK, I'm ready.

CHARLES

When I was a boy of ten or so, my father used to read me newspaper articles and discuss them with me. One day there was an item about a notorious thief who'd been caught and was awaiting trial. "What lessons can we learn from that thief?" he asked me. "Thou shalt not steal?" I suggested. "Of course," he said, "but put aside the morality issue for the moment." We talked about it for over an hour, and I still remember a lot of what we came up with. Know what you are trying to do before you start to work. Do your research thoroughly; the smallest details can be the most important.

THOMAS

Very clever. But I'm still sure as hell not going to toady to a dishonest slime like Owen.

CHARLES

Now that you mention Owen and slime in the same breath, allow me to present his namesake. He's aiding me in some research. That's him on top.

THOMAS

Scientific or social research? By the look of things, I'd say social. And who's that he's being social with?

CHARLES

Why that's Bishop Wilberforce. Again!

THOMAS

Well if it's all the same with you, I'm going to make sure that Mr. Owen doesn't get the opportunity to be "social" with Thomas Huxley.

CHARLES

I'll try not to let that happen. So Owen spoke up to call attention to himself. What happened next?

THOMAS

We squared off to go at it, but the chairman called an end to the day's session.

(Acknowledging and slightly mocking what Charles had said earlier ...)

And as 'gentlemen' and 'scientists,' we all went 'civilly' out to dinner together. But we hadn't even started the soup course before Owen and I were at it again.

CHARLES

You need to learn to control yourself.

THOMAS

But I'm your bulldog, Charles. I've sharpened my claws and teeth, and I'm ready to attack whenever you're threatened.

CHARLES

And I appreciate it, but perhaps you need to be more discriminating in whom you attack.

THOMAS

But I'm the epitome of discretion!

CHARLES

Oh? Well, I'm glad to hear that I'm mistaken. By the way, I thought that journal article of yours last fall did a great job of exposing Ehrenberg's blunders on diatomic reproduction.

THOMAS

Thank you. It's for the good of science to expose mistakes like that.

CHARLES

And you really gave poor Agassiz a hard time, didn't you?

THOMAS

He deserved it.

CHARLES

And those strata classification errors by Murchison. Tsk, tsk.

THOMAS

He's such a pompous fool, anyway.

CHARLES

Well, as long as you're judicious about whom you attack.

THOMAS

(Laughing.)

OK, Charles, just snap the chain and your bulldog will slink away with its tail between its legs.

CHARLES

Getting back to Oxford?

THOMAS

Right. So by the time the waiter brought the roast, Owen and I were circling around each other. He'd feint with a 'divine archetype' and I'd counter with a human-ape cranial similarity, but neither of us had the other on the ropes.

CHARLES

Wait a minute, are you a bulldog or a boxer?

THOMAS

For you, both! Anyway, there was a general outcry from the rest of the table calling for a formal debate, with Bishop Wilberforce representing the legions of god, and me as your proxy representing the forces of evil.

CHARLES

But Wilberforce wasn't going to have a chance in hell debating science against you.

THOMAS

I knew that. And I've always liked him, so at first I didn't want any part of it. But eventually I let myself be convinced and the debate was set for the next morning. I don't know how the word spread, but by 9 am Saturday there were over a thousand people in the hall.

CHARLES

Not that surprising, really, given the location.

THOMAS

I suppose. Anyway, Wilberforce went first.

CHARLES

Did he lose the coin toss?

THOMAS

No, it was his choice. His entire argument was based on evolution and natural selection not being supportable by facts. That wasn't going to be very convincing after I'd spent an hour presenting evidence.

CHARLES

But he had to know that you'd just present the evidence later.

THOMAS

What else could he do? Open with "The whole thing is a matter of faith," and follow that with "Thank you" and "Goodbye"?

CHARLES

It's worked for the past three thousand years. And it still will, in most places and in front of the most audiences. Unfortunately for Wilberforce and Owen, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History isn't one of those places, and a thousand University dons and their students isn't one of those audiences.

THOMAS

Whose side are you on, anyway?

CHARLES

Was I taking sides? I thought I was just analyzing ...

THOMAS

Well it doesn't matter, because he didn't play the faith card -- he played the joker.

CHARLES

This I've heard about.

(Imitating a dignified, but ingratiating cleric, rubbing his hands together as though he is washing them.)

"Perhaps Mr. Huxley would be so good as to inform us whether he's descended from an ape on his mother's side or his father's side."

THOMAS

(Responding as though in a hall in front of a thousand people.)

"My Lord, I am not ashamed to have a monkey for an ancestor, but I would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used such great gifts as yours to intentionally obscure the truth.

(Charles continues to play Wilberforce, wringing his hands and opening and closing his mouth like a fish.)

For a few seconds there was silence in the hall-- except for the sound of Lady Brewster's head hitting the floor as she fainted. Then pandemonium broke out as half of the crowd leapt to its feet to cheer and the rest sat and booed. It was wonderful.

CHARLES

I wish I could have been there.

THOMAS

So do I.

CHARLES

Still, I feel kind of sorry for Wilberforce. It must be terribly frightening to feel the logical foundations for your entire belief system start to crumble under your feet and be powerless to do anything about it.

THOMAS

Next you'll have me crying for Owen.

CHARLES

Now that you mention it, this has got to be even harder for Owen than it is for Wilberforce.

THOMAS

What?!

CHARLES

At least Wilberforce can retreat to the inexplicable nature of faith. I'm pretty sure that Owen has known for 20 years that he's wrong.

THOMAS

I don't believe it.

CHARLES

When I first got sick, Owen was one of the few people who came to visit me.

THOMAS

I always wondered why you tolerated him.

CHARLES

By that time I was pretty firm on the theory, but I was being very careful who I told about it. Making use of the lesson from my father about the thief, you know.

Owen was definitely not someone I was going to confide in, but we spent a lot of time talking around the subject. Then, when I published "Origin," I sent him a copy. He wrote back immediately to say it was the best explanation of the subject ever published. But only a few months later he started submitting poison pen reviews to the journals. I always wondered why he changed his mind.