

Wicked Sisters

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Abstract

Since the 1950s, C.P. Snow's 'Two Cultures Divide' has dictated a pessimistic opposition between the sciences and the humanities. Yet a growing number of theatre scholars examining the ever increasing body of dramatic works that explore scientific concepts argue that such works transgress simplistic notions of two opposing cultures, allowing for a cross disciplinary examination of ideas that benefits both areas of thought. In this essay, I argue that Australian playwright Alma De Groen's *Wicked Sisters* represents precisely this transgression by using concepts from evolutionary and artificial biology to explore human relationships. This exploration is more nuanced than simple metaphor; by juxtaposing these two concerns against each other, De Groen allows questions to be asked and ideas to be considered that would not be possible were each area of thought considered individually. This amalgamation of the scientific and the artistic sheds new light on both areas, and reflects not only an understanding between the two cultures, but a merging of them.

There's no morality now, only biology

-Meridee, *Wicked Sisters*, page 28.

"Artistic practice and scientific inquiry are commonly perceived as distinctly opposed modes of thought," explains Gautam Dasgupta in his 1985 essay *From Science to Theatre: Dramas of Speculative Thought* (237). "The underlying assumption is that art – specifically theatre in this case – concerns itself with human and social relations, while science purveys the domain of physical reality." If this is true, then Alma De Groen's 2002 play *Wicked Sisters* is the antithesis of this common perception. *Wicked Sisters* transgresses the traditional barrier between science and theatre. It is a play that uses human social relations to explore the ethical implications of scientific concepts, while using those scientific concepts to question human social relations. The play is "a rambunctious and argumentative and very ballsy discussion of all sorts of ideas" (Williams, 2002), and demonstrates not only the successful engagement of theatre with science, but the ability of theatre to explore scientific concepts in a unique and useful way, and in doing so elucidate new ideas about the implications of science for society.

Wicked Sisters is a play about biological competition and competition in life. Elizabeth Perkins (2003:v) explains that "In less than two hours spent with four women in their fifties, Alma De Groen presents the issues surrounding the elevation of rational intelligence above imaginative intelligence and the effect this has on the way we try to ensure our personal survival." The play juxtaposes the lives of four women, Meridee, Judith, Lydia and Hester, against a computer created by Meridee's deceased husband Alec which is "evolving strategies for artificial life forms: things that life anywhere in the universe would have to do in order to survive." (De Groen, 2002:1). The artificial life forms in the computer are ruthless, blindly competing for superiority and survival. At times, the women also behave that way, exemplified by Judith's ruthless "My first responsibility is to myself" (24), but they cannot always compete blindly as Alec's "critters" do. Each struggle to ensure the best life for herself, and to do the right thing by her companions. Each of the women has secrets, revealed over the course of the play, and together they question the role of biological survival in their actions. Meridee concludes "Competition. That's what drives us, whether you like it or not." (28), but Hester counters, "In their heart of hearts I think people are more altruistic than that. Even those in this room." (27). This juxtaposition of human relationships with ruthlessly competing computerised life forms allows the audience to see the connections forged between the two sets of ideas, between the human and the scientific. In this play, Alec's scientific experiment acts as a metaphor for the relationships between the four women, yet the connections between these two narrative elements go deeper than mere metaphor, and the women's relationships shed light on the validity and implications of Alec's experiment. The two do not exist in isolation, nor do they interact on a merely superficial level. In *Wicked Sisters*, the scientific and the humane are intrinsically and fundamentally related.

The play questions the notion of survival of the fittest and whether it truly applies to the human situation. Alec, the researcher investigating competition through the artificial life forms in the computer, clearly believed that it did. He took a mistress but discarded her when she refused to have his child, something Hester describes as "a Darwinian maximising his offspring" (39). He delighted in his computerised extinction events, to which he added all sorts of sound effects and paraphernalia. Describing his research, Hester explains:

It's one of the dreams of science: to start from nothing and create organisms we'd consider intelligent. It was what he did with that dream that scared me. Alec truly believed it was a universal law that the weak would die out no matter what you did, and that his results proved it. He was such a fundamentalist I often thought it must have been difficult reminding him he wasn't God. (11)

It is ironic that Alec lived his life by the credo of ruthless maximisation of survival, yet it was this attitude that ultimately led to his demise. His lack of respect for the emotional requirements of his wife drove her to push him off a cliff – “Proving, in fact, he wasn’t God” (11) says Meridee. It is also interesting to contrast Alec’s ruthless and unfeeling view of evolution and survival of the fittest against Charles Darwin’s view. Writing in *The Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin says:

There is a grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (460)

Darwin, one could interpret, viewed the notion of evolution with a certain majesty and beauty, delighting in the notion of new species arising. Alec, though described as Darwinian, delighted in the notion of extinction and destruction, quite opposite to Darwin himself. It is Hester, who plans to take over Alec’s research (which she claims he originally stole from her), whose more moderate views more closely resemble those of Darwin.

In *Wicked Sisters*, “there is no secure divide between the domestic world and the laboratory,” (Beer, 1996:331) – they are, in fact, one and the same. The single room in which the play takes place is Alec’s study within Meridee’s home, a space which in itself merges research and domesticity. Over the course of the play, the space becomes “feminised” (13), further showing the permeation of the humane into the scientific, while the computer dominates the set and periodically calls attention to itself with loud noises reminding the audience of the importance of the concepts of survival of the fittest and competition to the relationships between the four characters. Visually, this space represents the convergence Dasgupta says must exist in the individual searches of “both science and theatre [to] comprehend the nature of reality in all its varied manifestations” (238).

According to Giovanni Frazzetto (2002:820), “The amalgamation of scientific and artistic activities can be seen as an auspicious goal, linking two cultures that, in reality, are not so very far apart.” By combining the ideas of competition in evolution and competition in human individual survival, De Groen creates a situation thick with ethics and dilemmas over right and wrong. According to Kirsten Shepherd-Barr (2006: 53), it is this concern with ethics and morality that makes theatre the ideal medium for exploring the impact of science on society. She explains that “The heightened role of ethics in discussions of science and medicine deeply connects these fields to the theatre, since at some level most dramas have a concern over moral problems, and none more so than science plays with their inevitable ethical tangles.” As a science play, *Wicked Sisters*

emphatically tackles some of the ethical questions of evolutionary biology, such as the existence of altruism, social selection pressures, and the concepts of intelligence and empathy as an influence of the evolution of a species.

By examining these ethical dilemmas through theatre, De Groen can pose her argument in a way not available in science alone, and in doing so explores different aspects of the issues. Where purely scientific discussions are limited to more abstract concepts, *Wicked Sisters* examines evolutionary issues in a more humane environment, showing their relevance to society. This is not to say that discussions of abstract concepts are not important or necessary, but such theatrical explorations of issues allow a different sort of discussion to occur. Gillian Beer (173) states that “questions can change their import when posed within different genres.” By exploring the issues that are important to science by means of theatre, new and different concerns can and will arise. Beer (1) explains that “ideas cannot survive long lodged within a single domain. They need the traffic of the apparently *inappropriate* audience as well as the tight group of co-workers if they are to thrive and generate further thinking” (emphasis in original). By this thinking, we cannot hope to fully understand the full implications of scientific ideas without appropriating them into new contexts such as theatre. Dasgupta asserts that “Ideas exist in the world to be shared. And in any particular era, the most adventurous artists incorporate the advanced thought of their times (and all times) into their work” (246). This sharing of ideas is essential for progressing as a society and fully coming to grips with the ethical issues advances in science pose. Shepherd-Barr shows that “theatre can play a vital role in helping us understand our encounter with the increasingly urgent questions and issues posed by science” (218), and *Wicked Sisters* clearly exemplifies this ability.

In an interview with Robyn Williams (2002), Alma De Groen explained “I think it's important for theatre to be presenting ideas about science because science is so important and theatre I think neglects science as a subject.” It is this engagement with themes in science that makes *Wicked Sisters* such an engrossing play. According to Perkins (2003:xi-xii), De Groen “does not encourage the notion that everything is relative. The firm moral centre is an imaginative understanding of the human effort to survive, an effort that requires empathy and sharing, and intelligent ethics rather than Darwinian competition.” It is by combining issues in human relationships and issues in evolutionary biology that *Wicked Sisters* makes this argument, and successfully confronts its audience with issues that are perhaps outside of their usual sphere of thought but are important to consider for understanding both our place in the universe and the ways that we act as individuals.

According to Shepherd-Barr, “theatre [has] pride of place as the site of substantive intersection between the hard sciences and the humanities. No other genre

or art form has seen such a powerful merging of the two cultures of science and humanities" (1). Plays such as Caryl Churchill's *A Number*, Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* and Čapek's *R.U.R.* demonstrate this intersection, dealing with scientific themes and ideas in a humane rather than abstract manner. Frezzetto (820) agrees, saying that "theatre, which is often a means of entertainment or a stimulus for moral, political and personal reflection, is becoming a vehicle for scientific didacticism. It can convey concepts and stimulate elaborate reflections about them," thus enabling the public to effectively engage in active debate about these issues. Shepherd-Barr goes one step further, suggesting that "the intersection of science and the stage may represent precisely the kind of 'third culture' that [C. P.] Snow envisioned" (45). It is the duality of ideas, the humane and the logical, the artistic and the scientific, that makes this exploration possible.

Eminent dramatist Peter Brook (quoted by Shepherd-Barr, 49) said that "today ... we have a new mythology. Science explores the same eternal mysteries with a new symbolic language." The symbolic language of the stage makes scientific issues accessible to a new audience. By exploring the intersection of morality and biology, *Wicked Sisters* sheds new light on both ethics in evolutionary biology and human relationships. It transcends notions of a barrier between science and art, effectively using art to probe new questions and posit interesting solutions to questions in science.

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