AN EXPERIMENT WITH AN AIR PUMP

ACT ONE

Prologue

Chiasmocuro lighting up on slow revolve tableau involving the whole cast (except Susannah/Ellen), which suggests Joseph Wright's painting 'An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump.' Fenwick takes the role of the scientific demonstrator. Revolve continues slowly throughout this scene.

The bird flutters in the glass dome. Strategically placed above the audience are four large projections of Wright's painting.

Ellen, dressed casually in loose trousers, T-shirt, deck shoes, is looking up at them. Two dressers come on with her costume, wig, shoes, etc., for the part of Susannah.

ELLEN. I've loved this painting since I was thirteen years old. I've loved it because it has a scientist at the heart of it, a scientist where you usually find god. Here, centre stage, is not a saint or an exchangel, but a man. Look at his face, bathed in celestial light, here is a man beatified by his search for truth. As a child enraptured by the possibilities of science, this painting set my heart racing, it made the blood tingle in my veins. I wanted to be
this scientist; I wanted to be up there in the thick of it, all eyes drawn to me, frontiers tumbling before my merciless deconstruction. I was thirteen. Other girls wanted to marry Marc Bolan. I had smaller ambitions. I wanted to be god. (The dressers hook her into a tight corset over her tee shirt.) This painting described the world to me. The two small girls on the right are terrified he's going to kill their pet dove. The young scientist on the left, is captivated, fascinated, his watch primed, he doesn't care whether the dove dies or not. For him what matters is the process of experiment and the intoxication of discovery. The two young lovers next to him don't give a damn about any of it. (The dressers help her into her dress and shoes, put on her wig.) But the elderly man in the chair is worried about what it all means. He's worried about the ethics of dabbling with life and death. I think he's wondering where it's all going to end. He's the dead hand of caution. He bears the weight of all the old certainties and he knows they're slipping away from him, and from his kind. But when I was thirteen, what held me more than anything, was the drama at the centre of it all, the clouds scudding across a stage set moon, the candlelight dipping and flickering. Who would not want to be caught up in this world? Who could resist the power of light over darkness? (The dressers hand her a fan and leave. The lights change, the projections fade, and as Susannah, she joins the tableau.)

MARIA. Will he die papa?
FENWICK. We'll see, won't we?
MARIA. I don't want him to die.
ARMSTRONG. It's only a bird.
HARRIET. It's Maria's pet.
ARMSTRONG. The world is bursting with birds, she can get another — (Maria bursts into tears.)
MARIA. I don't want another one. I want this one! I named him for my fiancé.
HARRIET. They do have a similar intellectual capacity.
SUSANNAH. Don't start Harriet.
ROGET. Perhaps we could use a different bird . . .
ARMSTRONG. D'you happen to have one on you?
ROGET. Well, I could — I'm sure we could find one —

SUSANNAH. Mr. Roget, there's really no need to go trampling round the garden with a net. I'm afraid Maria is being a dreadful baby.
MARIA. I don't want Edward to die papa —
SUSANNAH. Maria, show a little faith, your father would never conduct an experiment unless he was quite sure of the outcome, isn't that so?
FENWICK. You haven't quite grasped the subtext of the word "experiment," Susannah —
MARIA. He's going to kill Edward!
ARMSTRONG. This goes to prove the point I made earlier sir: Keep infants away from the fireplace and women away from science. (Fenwick gives him a long look.)
FENWICK. How old are you now Armstrong?
ARMSTRONG. I'm about to be twenty-six sir.
FENWICK. You're an awful prig, has anyone ever told you that? (He performs the experiment. Gasps. The bird flutters out, unharmed. Maria gives a cry of delight, general clapping, laughter. Blackout.)

Scene 1

Bring sounds of rioting going on outside — breaking glass, a blazing mob, crashes, screams etc. A chandelier descends from the ceiling and throws out scattered, shimmering light.

A bewildering variety of stuffed birds, animals, and reptiles are suspended on strings, mounted as phials, displayed in cases. A large cluttered desk, piled up with books, a microscope, a skull, bits of bodies and organs pickled in jars, nearby a telescope. Various bits of machinery.

Fenwick sits at his desk, writing calmly, ignoring the tumult outside.

Susannah sits as a small card table endlessly playing