

ISAAC'S EYE

BY LUCAS HNATH



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ISAAC'S EYE was commissioned and developed by
The Ensemble Studio Theatre/Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Science and Technology Project
and received its world premiere at The Ensemble Studio Theatre on February 9, 2013.

For Marisa Viola.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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PERFORMANCE NOTES

FOOTNOTES

All footnotes are meant to be written on the walls as the play unfolds. Depending on the production's specific staging and venue, it might not be advisable to write all of the footnotes live. There are times, especially if the writing risks undercutting a moment in a scene, when it might be wise to have the text pre-written and let the "Actor" reveal it in some simple and elegant way.

ELLIPSES

Ellipses indicate pauses and/or sidelong glances.

STYLE

While this play takes place in the 17th century, there should be no attempt to "play period." Actors speak as they speak. And please no accents.

PACE

Play the play briskly and with a light touch. Try to pause only on the ellipses. Otherwise, keep it moving.

NEEDLES

In the play's penultimate scene, a character inserts a needle into his tear duct. There are many ways to accomplish this "special effect." In the play's original production, Eric Walton designed a method by which the actor could press the needle up against the upper-ridge of his nose. A piece of double-sided tape held the needle in place. The actor's subtle-yet-pained gestures were what really "sold" the illusion.

ISAAC'S EYE received its world premiere at the Ensemble Studio Theatre (William Carden, Artistic Director; Paul Alexander Slee, Executive Director) in New York City, opening on February 9, 2013. It was directed by Lindsay Firman; the set design was by Nick Francone; the costume design was by Suzanne Chesney; the lighting design was by Les Dickert; the sound design was by Shane Rettig; and the production stage manager was Erin Maureen Koster. The cast was as follows:

ISAAC NEWTON Haskell King
ROBERT HOOKE Michael Louis Serafin-Wells
ACTOR/DYING MAN Jeff Biehl
CATHERINE Kristen Bush

CHARACTERS

ISAAC NEWTON — in his 20s

ROBERT HOOKE — in his 40s

CATHERINE — in her 30s

ACTOR/DYING MAN NAMED SAM — any age
will do (but at least older than Isaac)

PLACE

Woollesthorpe.

TIME

The 17th century.

ISAAC'S EYE

ACT ONE

A large room. The walls are black and bare but brightly lit.

The stage is bare except for a table. On it, some props that will be used during the performance — a box of chalk, a Bible, a knife, a piece of cork, and sticking out of the cork is a long needle. The needle gleams conspicuously under the bright light.

Before the house lights dim, an Actor addresses the audience.

ACTOR.

Isaac Newton knew or thought he knew,
he thought he knew there was something called ether.
He thought there was ether everywhere.
Ether in the air, ether in between the air.
Ether everywhere there was a there.
And because he thought there was ether everywhere,
it helped him imagine how things moved.
He could imagine that things moved on ether,
in his head, that's how things moved.

We know now what Newton did not know then:
there's no such thing as ether.
But by believing that ether was real,
Isaac could see things he could not have seen
if he did not think there was something there
that was not really there.

This play is filled with ether.
There are things in this play that are not true.
There are also things that are true,
lots of things,
even things that are true that don't sound true but are true.
Like, when he was a kid, Isaac Newton
threatened to burn down the house and kill his parents.
That's true.
But there are also things in this play that are not true.
But like ether, the lies are here to help
make sense of the things that are true.

Because we don't want to lie to you,
anything that's true, we'll write on the wall.
If it's not on the wall, just know, it might be made up.
(Writes "Isaac threatened to burn down his parents' house.")
This is true.
(House lights begin to dim and Isaac enters.)
Also true, Isaac is a small¹ man who had white hair at an early age.²
(Points at Isaac.)
He is in his 20s³ and already his hair is white,
and he is small.
Also true, there was a plague in England.
Around 1665, 66, there was a plague⁴ in England.
Also true, Isaac knew a woman named Catherine Storer.⁵
Daughter of an apothecary.
(Catherine enters.)
He might have loved her, we don't know.
Also true, Isaac was once in her attic
and on her attic wall he wrote,
ISAAC.
Do you mind if I write something on your wall?
CATHERINE.
... Okay.

1 Small man

2 Young w/ white hair

3 20s

4 1665, 66 plague

5 Catherine Storer, apothecary's daughter

ACTOR.

Scene One: Isaac writes on Catherine's attic wall⁶ —

ISAAC.

I'm going to write on your wall.

ACTOR.

— verses from the Eikon Basilike —

(Actor writes the following on the wall. Isaac pantomimes writing simultaneously.)

ISAAC.

Let my sufferings satiate the malice of mine enemies,
but let their cruelty never exceed the measure of my charity.
Banish from me all thoughts of Revenge,
that I may not lose the reward, nor thou the glory of my patience.

ACTOR.

He wrote this on her wall.

ISAAC.

It's from the diaries of King Charles before he was executed —

ACTOR.

True as well —

ISAAC.

And this is how I feel.

ACTOR.

And she says —

CATHERINE.

Who are your enemies?

ISAAC.

Everyone —

ACTOR.

He says —

ISAAC.

Everyone.

CATHERINE.

Everyone?

ISAAC.

Everyone.

CATHERINE.

What about your mother?

ISAAC.

Enemy.

⁶ Eikon Basilike on C's wall

CATHERINE.

Your stepfather.

ISAAC.

Enemy.

CATHERINE.

My father?

ISAAC.

He's dead.

CATHERINE.

But when he was alive.

ISAAC.

Not an enemy.

CATHERINE.

And me?

What about me?

ISAAC.

... Not an enemy.

CATHERINE.

That's good.

ISAAC.

I saw two dead bodies in the street today,

I saw them and I thought: you live and you die.

And when you die you go to heaven,

and you can no longer do the things you did on Earth.

I saw two people die in the middle of the street today.

They died from the plague.

I could die tomorrow.

You could die the day after.

Don't you feel there are things

you would like to do before you die?

CATHERINE.

Yes, I think about that and I think about marriage

and I think about having a kid.

ISAAC.

I think about work.

I think about having people know who I am

and know about things I'm working on.

CATHERINE.

...

ISAAC.

I think, I don't want to die here.

I think about the city and how much I miss the city.

I think about how everyone here's just a bunch of farmers.

Farmers with nothing in their heads.

Not thinking about much.

CATHERINE.

I know how you hate farmers.

ISAAC.

I think, I don't have enough money to go to London.

I think, I need to get a job there before I go.

I think, that's gonna be hard, that's

gonna be hard unless I have connections,

but if I were able to get into that club,

that club that people are in with all the connections,

the Royal Society, if I could get into that club,

that best of the best Royal thinkers club,

I think, if I joined the Royal Society, that would be a start.

If I were in the Royal Society, I'd be famous,

because I'd be in the best-of-the-best club,

and everyone would think, in turn, I'm one of the best of the best —

CATHERINE.

I think you are —

ISAAC.

No, I know, but if I were in the club,

then everyone would respect me.

I'd get to meet kings and queens and other royal people.

I'd get commissions.

I'd get people paying me to study the things I want to study.

People would write books about me.

People would paint my portrait.

People would hang my portrait.

People would see my portrait even after I'm dead

and would know what I look like when I'm no longer here.

The people here, once they're dead, their faces are gone.

I think that's a terrible thing.

CATHERINE.

...

ISAAC.

Maybe if I got really famous they'd put my face on money.

ISAAC'S EYE

by Lucas Hnath

3M, 1W

To understand light and optics better, young Isaac Newton inserted a long needle “between my eye and the bone, as near to the backside of my eye as I could.” Why take such a risk? Lucas Hnath reimagines the contentious, plague-ravaged world Newton inhabited in *ISAAC'S EYE*, exploring the dreams and longings that drove the rural farm boy to become one of the greatest thinkers in modern science.

“Mr. Hnath wins a whole mess of points for originality ... [an] odd little jeu d’esprit ... [A] quirky sendup of fusty historical dramas ... Philosophically potent ...”
—**The New York Times**

“Few plays are anywhere near as clever ... The talented Hnath creates a disorienting, ironic atmosphere, a kind of Rushmore plus calculus.”
—**Time Out New York**

“No one can know for sure what motivated Newton to become the person he did ... But [Hnath] does a credible job in providing a context for a brilliant but troubled young man who made incredible contributions to scientific knowledge — at significant cost to himself.”
—**CurtainUp**

Also by Lucas Hnath

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