

# [Brown Tackles Challenging Show in Lives of the Great Poisoners](#)

The latest show from Brown University Theatre's Sock and Buskin is an extremely ambitious project; any Caryl Churchill play is enough of a challenge on its own, but the apparently rarely performed *Lives of the Great Poisoners* is more of an opera than a play, minimally accompanied and demanding in both vocal and technical skill. The play, directed in Brown's production by Richard Waterhouse, follows three notable poisoners from history-slash-legend: Dr. Crippen (best known to me as a wax resident of Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors), Medea (of Greek myth) and Madame de Brinvilliers (17th century French aristocrat), through the framing device of a fourth, less commonly thought of as a poisoner: Thomas Midgley, the inventor of leaded gasoline and chlorofluorocarbons (freon, a refrigerant chemical that depletes the ozone layer). The superlative musical direction — the first element of the play the audience encounters — is by Cass Ball, and the choreography, which stylizes a number of the murders and other events in the play, is by Yon Tande.

Midgley (Daniel Kushner) moves freely throughout scenes he wouldn't "historically" have been a part of; this device of Churchill's, I felt, adds genuine suspense to events that one might think were set in stone, especially in the Brinvilliers act where the audience might wonder if she or her lover Sainte-Croix will kill him. Charles Stewart, as Sainte-Croix (and earlier as Crippen), stands out particularly in this act, with a matter-of-fact monologue about how commonplace and embedded in society poisoning is. (Churchill's references to social issues, such as environmental poisoning and feminism, don't seem heavy-handed.) Sophie Urquhart is also most at home as Madame de Brinvilliers; her earlier Mrs. Crippen and Medea are a little unconvincingly acted, though very impressively sung. The costumes, by Jessie Darrell Jarbadan, emphasize the connections between the three acts: Urquhart always appears in a green dress and red wig, à la Poison Ivy, each appropriate to the act's respective historical period.

*Lives of the Great Poisoners* is nonetheless an ensemble piece: the story is told through music and movement provided by the whole cast. Ball and Tande's work does more than just support the story; it is an integral part of its telling, through more languages than speech and natural movement. (The music, a combination of complicated ensembles and dramatic monologues and duets, is by Orlando Gough; choreography in the original production was by Ian Spink. Both are credited as Churchill's co-authors.)

The light and set design, by Tim Hett and Renee Surprenant respectively, are truly impressive. They complement each other, and the play itself, perfectly, providing a sinister atmosphere and spaces for the singers, actors and dancers, who are sometimes half-seen or illuminated from below.

*Lives of the Great Poisoners* ran through Nov 12 at Brown University.