

Workshop introduction

Hello, everyone. I'm Adam Frank, and I'm very pleased to welcome you to this workshop presentation of a play I wrote called *Some Mad Scientists*. You are listening to fragmentary sayings or slogans from the writings of an ancient Greek philosopher, Democritus of Abdera, who is one of the lead characters in this evening's performance. These fragments are all that remain of over 40 books he is said to have written, none of which survived antiquity. Democritus is most often cast as one of the "pre-Socratics," which is to say, one of those guys who gets covered, very briefly, during the first week of your standard introduction-to-ancient-philosophy course, before you move on to Plato and Aristotle. But, in fact, Democritus was almost an exact contemporary of Socrates, well known for his atomic theory of matter and important for a non-Platonist tradition, that of Epicurus and Lucretius. If Plato, in his dialogues, never once mentions Democritus, it's likely because this "pre-Socratic" was one of Socrates' great rivals. "For I came to Athens and no one knew me," Democritus is quoted to have said a few times.

Tonight's play doesn't deal with the historical Democritus or these philosophical conflicts directly, you will be relieved to know; although some of the fragments will be spoken by another character, a woman who calls herself Denocritus, a former student who is testing his ideas in her own life situations. My script is based a later, Greco-Roman text, from around the first century; according to the critic Mikhail Bakhtin, this was "the first work to develop the 'maniac theme' (the madness of the laughing Democritus)." When I first read this description (more than ten years ago), I tracked down what I imagined was going to be the earliest depiction of mad science in the "west," and I was pretty thrilled to read what struck me as both an alien and startlingly contemporary

text. The anonymous writer tells the story of a meeting between Democritus, who is considered mad by his townspeople, and Hippocrates the physician, who they have invited to cure him.

There's a lot to say from a scholarly perspective about this strange piece of writing and its reception. But to keep things brief and introductory, my strongest interest has been in how this writing poses a very basic question: what would a science be like that included the emotional range of the scientist in what counts as knowledge? Given the poor reputation that emotion or feeling has had when it comes to scientific knowledge, I wanted to dramatize, what seemed unusual to me, an explicit, even over-the-top investigation into the role of affect or feeling in what I still want to call mad science. In the diatribe that forms the center of this play (which is really a long rant, that I have lifted, almost directly, from the English translations), Democritus begins to unfold the roles for anger, grief, envy, and enjoyment in (scientific) understanding. I'll ask that you try to hear, not only the more moralizing or ideological aspects of this rant, but also its psychedelic dynamics. I hope we can convey some of those here.

Tonight's performance is a somewhat elaborated staged reading: the actors will be playing multiple parts and reading from their scripts, and at the same time, director Alex Ferguson and scenographer Andreas Kahre are experimenting with some staging ideas. They have come up with what I think are very inventive ways of bringing this somewhat recalcitrant material to the stage. After the show, please give us some feedback, over a glass of wine. If you can't stay, don't hesitate to email me or Alex with your responses.

Your seats are now vacant: please take one. I'll be back later with my acknowledgments and thanks. Now, I hope you enjoy *Some Mad Scientists*.

Acnowledgments

Lots of people to thank. First of all, the actors for agreeing to participate: David Adams, Nneka Croal, Anton Lipovetsky, and Mike Wasko. Thanks to director Alex Ferguson, and scenographer Andreas Kahre. Thanks to Jeff Harrison for technical direction, Colin Ferguson for cueing lights and sound, to Steven Smulovitz for lending us his lights, Taher Hashemi at Arts A/V for the equipment and help, Owen and Scott at the Belkin for their hospitality and assistance. This project was initially conceived as a musical audio drama, which has been completed and can be heard online (at sOMEMADscientists.org). We used some of Sam Shalabi's music in tonight's performance.

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