

***THE NOTEBOOKS OF LEONARDO DA VINCI*  
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The Significant Other and I managed to secure "rush tix" for the Berkeley Rep's production of Mary Zimmerman's *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*. Zimmerman works out of Chicago as part of the much awarded Lookingglass Theatre. We had been much taken by Zimmerman's very exciting adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which performed on Broadway and toured here last year to standing ovations every night. You can read a review of that production in the [Island-Life 2002](#) section. Just do a search in your browser for the word "Ovid".

This time around, Mary has once again selected extraordinarily difficult material to dramatize with wildly innovative set design and dramaturgy. The piece consists of original music, a couple pop songs, and a few fragments of original dialogue performed entirely in Italian, all built around the notes Leonardo

da Vinci wrote to himself over a long career. These notes were grocery lists, financial accounting tots, philosophical musings, scraps of dreams, mechanical notes for machines never built -- in fact all the scrap "postits" that you or I would keep next to the telephone or the computer. Except these notes were the notes of the premier genius of the Renaissance.

DaVinci was born out of wedlock in the mid 1500's in northern Italy as the sire of a middle class tradesman and a peasant woman. From this modest beginning he went on to become an extraordinary polymath, developing advanced skills in music, astronomy, physics, mathematics, structural engineering, mechanical engineering, biology, draftsmanship, architecture, military defense, as well as the painting for which he is most famous. He apparently invented the bicycle, significantly advanced our understanding of gross human anatomy, invented the helicopter, and designed the first geodesic domes with such integrity that those designs are still employed today,

Typically quixotic and addicted to procrastination, the gifted daVinci would drop major projects, never to be completed only to come a cropper with the most astonishing discoveries. One of his casual notes casually describes the following: ". . .ah yes, the sun never moves. The earth does that. Makes it appear the sun moves." With that rather important observation he dropped the entire subject, apparently never finding it worth mentioning to the rest of the world. But then, perhaps word of Galileo got through to him.

He performed dissections upon more than 18 human cadavers in secret, writing copious notes and creating hundreds of detailed anatomical sketches that vastly increased our knowledge of human anatomy.

Zimmerman's presentation could have been a rather dry and wearisome pastiche, but with the aid of Scenic Designer Scott Bradley, who created a wonderworld of a set combining walls of old-fashioned file drawers flanking an open space over which a tubular U-shaped structure was used by actors as trapeze, ceiling, and prop hanger, and fronting a balcony with drops and projections.

Zimmerman chose to employ the methods and style of the old *Commedia dell' arte*, an Italian cabaret genre that features music, outre masks, broad gestures, and bawdy badinage. The result enlivened what could have been rather dry musings of a master on rather dry subjects. For example, in one sequence, Mariann Mayberry, describes daVinci's ideas on relative weight and mass physically with the imposing form of Paul Oakley Stovall. Now Stovall, standing some six foot four and well muscled must weigh somewhere near 300 pounds while the lithe Mayberry probably checks in around 160, assuming higher than average muscle density due to physical conditioning. She calmly kept up her academic lecture while slinging Stovall around like a basket. Then, never taking a break, she repeatedly threw herself from across the stage at Stovall who tossed and threw her and hung her in various positions as she maintained an earnest lecture on physics until, as she continued to speak, he was swinging her about in a circle like a slingshot faster and faster.

The display sort of stopped the House.

The physical demands for this kind of thing are extraordinary. We counted actor Doug Hara, last seen as a pudgy Cupid in the previous production, do at least 50 pull-ups to the overhead structure while talking non stop and performing bicycle moves with his legs. He finished up with a cartwheel across the stage. Of course, nowadays he does look quite a bit leaner. In another case we watched Lucia Brawley haul herself up, revolve backwards on the bar and hang with her arms *behind* her for a good 20 seconds before reversing the turn and dropping down. In order to do this, the actress must need to "desocket" her arms within the rotator cuff and then resocket without injury.

Zimmerman has an enviably talented company on which to draw for her works. Jane Cho conversed easily in Italian and sang exquisitely, turning the old Vera Lynn song "We'll meet Again" into an aria. Brawley alternated easily between gymnastics as described above and a regal falcon, before becoming the comic victim of daVinci's attempts at mechanical flight, pratfalling across the stage in a delightful sequence that ends with daVinci's realization "We have everything here of the Bird . . . except its soul . . . I have wasted hours."

It is difficult to mouth the words of a genius, especially words never meant to survive beyond a days shopping or a trip abroad. Mayberry and actor Christopher Donahue had the best success in speaking the lines naturally without falling into a sort of pseudo-Shakespearean attitude. Leonardo recalled in his notes coming across a cave in the hills which both attracted and repelled him with somber seriousness. This cave of mystery is what pulls him throughout

his life -- he lived to about 69 -- and it is Mayberry who, as Leonardo, finally enters the darkness at the end and it is Donahue who speaks the final words of the piece, also as Leonardo "All this time I thought I had been learning how to live, when, in fact, I have been learning how to die."

The cast would have taken more than two curtain calls, but they were understandably fatigued.

As for Leonardo, we would ask you to follow the reminders he often wrote to himself, and "Go into the market and buy all the birds you can find. Then set them free in the hills."

Text: Leonardo da Vinci  
Adaptor & Director: Mary Zimmerman

The cast of *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* includes: Doug Hara and Louise Lamson, Christopher Donahue, Kyle Hall and Mariann Mayberry, as well as Jane C. Cho and Paul Oakley Stovall, and Berkeley Rep newcomer Lizzie Cooper Davis, all performing a variety of named and unnamed roles

Set designer: Scott Bradley  
Costume designer: Mara Blumenfeld (based on original designs by Allison Reeds)  
Original music: composed by Miriam Sturm and Michael Bodeen  
Production stage manager: Cynthia Cahill.