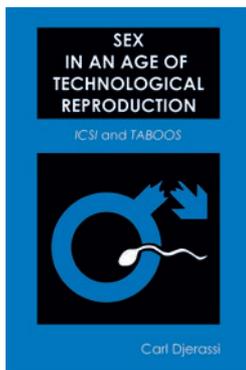


## Science-in-theatre- in-science

Suresh Rattan

**Sex in an Age of Technological  
Reproduction: ICSI and Taboos**  
by Carl Djerassi

The University of Wisconsin Press,  
Madison, WI, USA  
136 pp, plus a DVD, \$24.95  
ISBN 9780299227944



Carl Djerassi—often referred to as the father of the contraceptive pill—continues his ventures into the genre of what he calls “science-in-theatre” with his latest publication, *Sex in an Age of Technological Reproduction*:

*ICSI and Taboos*. His previous works include the novel *Cantor's Dilemma* (2002; Innsbruck, Germany: Haymon) and the play *Oxygen* (2001; Weinheim, Germany: Wiley-VCH)—the latter written with the Chemistry Nobel laureate Roald Hoffman—both of which were received enthusiastically around the world. It was therefore with heightened expectations and excitement that I read *Sex in an Age of Technological Reproduction*, although it has left me with mixed feelings about its varying levels of success.

This slim book, and its accompanying short film, contains two scripts for two

independent plays. The first, *ICSI* (intra-cytoplasmic sperm injection), is billed as a pedagogic work intended to be useful for classroom teaching and discussion. It is written in the form of a dialogue between a young, pushy and almost science-sceptical TV journalist and an experienced, tough, boring-but-trying-to-be-humorous scientist, and revolves around their interaction throughout the course of an interview in which they fail to communicate well. The play can be performed in about 40 minutes at any location, with or without the use of the audiovisual material provided on the accompanying DVD and in the book.

The main themes of this four-scene play are both the basic scientific information about the latest reproductive technology, and its social and ethical implications. *ICSI* involves the artificial selection of a single sperm that is injected directly into an egg and therefore inherently bypasses the natural force of selection among millions of sperm, thus separating the emotional and relational act of making love from that of fertilizing an ovum. The separation of the sexual act from reproduction is not a new theme, and it has been discussed since the earliest methods of *in vitro* fertilization were developed. As a representative of the genre ‘science-in-theatre’, *ICSI* is a good example in which a lot of scientific information is given with some discussion about its ethical implications; it can certainly form the basis of further discussions in the classroom or other settings.

However, there is very little ‘theatre’ in the script, and its literary and theatrical possibilities are limited. On the whole, the dialogue quickly becomes boring and repetitive, and over-labours the failing, somewhat contrived discussion between the scientist and the journalist. The audiovisual material

is also not very imaginative and consists of drawings in the book itself and a not terribly exciting short movie that focuses on millions of sperms floating around an egg.

In contrast to *ICSI*, the second play, *Taboos*—which is a two-act play in 12 scenes—has very little science but a lot of ethical discussion. If we take for granted that the act of sex can be separated from the act of potentially creating new life, and that new life can be created artificially, then accepted ideas about relationships—mothers, fathers, uncles, aunties, cousins and so on—become easily challenged or threatened within the established norms of a society. This also leads to a redefining and reconstructing of the social norms of parenthood, sex education, and other ideas and practices integral to the idea of family. *Taboos* requires five actors and, in contrast to *ICSI*, has the real possibility of having a literary and theatrical impact. Even if it is only read as a script, *Taboos* is a thoroughly enjoyable and thought provoking play, highly capable of stimulating discussion in any setting. It is an excellent example of ‘theatre-in-science’, as was Djerassi’s earlier play *Oxygen*. I am eagerly waiting for a local theatre group to perform these plays in my vicinity; or perhaps I should try to convince my actor-to-be son that his university’s drama department should take Djerassi’s ‘science-in-theatre’ to theatrical heights. In the meantime, despite *ICSI*’s shortcomings, which are more than made up for by *Taboos*, I highly recommend this book.

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doi:10.1038/embor.2008.234

Published online 5 December 2008