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Alan Alda

Actor discusses his new play on Marie Curie and communicating science

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Credit: Rudy Baum/C&EN

Marie Curie and **Alan Alda** are an odd couple, dramatically. The brilliant and prickly scientist who won Nobel Prizes in 1903 (physics) and 1911 (chemistry) and the actor who most famously portrayed Hawkeye Pierce in the long-running and beloved television series "M*A*S*H" do not at first blush seem to have much in common.

But looks can be deceiving. Alda, who has no training in science, is nevertheless a big fan of science. For 11 years, he hosted the PBS television program "Scientific American Frontiers," which took him around the world having conversations with scientists about what they do.

"I have a very passionate interest in introducing people to the wonder of science," Alda tells C&EN. "I only know science as a consumer. I don't have the math to really see deeply into it myself. However, I'm just amazed by it. That the human brain can achieve science, especially with the depth it has, is to me one of the wonders of the world, one of the wonders of being alive. And for that to take place unnoticed by most of us seems foolish. It's like not noticing the sky."

Alda's most recent project to bring a scientific subject to a broad audience is the play "Radiance: The Passion of Marie Curie," which he has been researching and writing for the past four years. "Radiance" had its premiere on Nov. 1 at the **Geffen Playhouse** in Los Angeles. Anna Gunn, who plays Skyler White on the Emmy Award-winning series "Breaking Bad," is playing Marie Curie.

Most of the events in "Radiance" occur between 1903 and 1911. In 1903, Marie Curie shared the Nobel Prize in Physics with her husband, Pierre, and Henri Becquerel for the discovery and investigation of radioactive substances. However, only Pierre Curie and Becquerel had originally been nominated for the prize, and Marie Curie was included only after intervention by Pierre and a member of the Nobel Committee. Only Pierre and Becquerel actually received the prize from the king of Sweden; Marie was relegated to sit in the audience.

In 1906, Pierre Curie died at the age of 49 after being run over by a horse-drawn wagon. Despite Marie's deep depression that followed, she continued her work on isolating pure polonium and radium, which she knew existed from her work on pitchblende ore. By 1910, she had isolated both, proving their existence. She had also begun an affair with her close friend, the mathematician Paul Langevin. In 1911, Langevin's wife, Jeanne, exposed the affair to the press only days after the Nobel Committee had informed Marie that she was being awarded the chemistry prize for the discovery of radium and polonium. Subsequently, the Nobel Committee tried to convince Curie not to accept the prize until the matter of the affair with Langevin was cleared up. But she refused, arguing that the prize was being awarded for the discovery of two new elements and that there was no connection between those discoveries and her private life.

Alda dramatizes these events deftly. The Marie Curie who emerges in the play embodies the almost obsessively determined scientist we know from biographies and movies. There is, however, a reason for the subtitle of the play: This Marie Curie is passionate about her science, but she is also a passionate woman—deeply in love with her soul mate, Pierre, and, later,

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almost recklessly heedless with her lover, Langevin. By the end of the play, she has become fiercely independent and ready to live the rest of her life on her own terms.

Alda sees “Radiance” as a way to engage the public in a scientific topic. Nevertheless, he says, “my first responsibility is to make a play that people will be engaged by at as deep a level as possible. It’s not a science lesson. There are some funny things in it. There’s a human story that I’m tracking.”

Alda is also deeply involved in helping scientists improve their ability to communicate with the public. “It occurred to me toward the end of ‘Frontiers’ that we had actually discovered a different way of presenting science, which was to have the scientists talk about the science themselves without someone else explaining it,” Alda says. “The way we did it was through the medium of conversation where I would go in with no set list of questions to ask. I didn’t have an agenda. I just asked them what they were doing and listened to them and tried to understand it.”

Alda discussed his ideas about teaching scientists to be better communicators at a number of colleges and universities without raising very much interest. However, the State University of New York, Stony Brook, did buy into them, and the result is the Center for Communicating Science in the department of journalism where Alda is now a visiting professor. One of the innovative ideas he brought to the center is using improvisational techniques to improve scientists’ ability to connect with their listeners.

“Good communication is an essential part of science,” Alda says. “Sometimes scientists don’t even understand each other.” □

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Comments

Sharon Donovan Dodd (November 9, 2011 1:01 PM)
Rudy, what a great interview....and wonderful story, and play, too. I love the concept of making science more accessible via other corridors, entertainment, for one....also fun to tap a celebrity on the side of the science equation.
» **Reply**

Rudy Baum (November 11, 2011 8:38 AM)
Thanks, Sharon. It was a great interview. I'm going to see "Radiance" next week in Los Angeles during a visit to the California Nanosystems Institute. I'm sure seeing the play will be even more interesting than reading it.
» **Reply**

James Flinn (November 14, 2011 11:53 AM)
A movie possibility?
» **Reply**

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