



ADA AND THE ENGINE

BY LAUREN
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DRAMATISTS
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ADA AND THE ENGINE is a Central Works Method play. It was commissioned and premiered by Central Works (Gary Graves and Jan Zvaifler, Company Co-Directors) at the Berkeley City Club on October 17, 2016. It was directed by Gary Graves, the costume design was by Tammy Berlin, the lighting design was by Gary Graves, the prop design was by Debbie Shelley, the choreography was by Travis Santell Rowland, the sound design was by Gregory Scharpen, special music was composed by the Kilbanes, and the stage manager was Vanessa Ramos. The cast was as follows:

ADA BYRON LOVELACE	Kathryn Zdan
LADY ANABELLA BYRON/ MARY SOMMERVILLE	Jan Zvaifler
CHARLES BABBAGE	Kevin Clarke
LORD LOVELACE/BYRON	Josh Schell

CHARACTERS

*The play may be performed with 6 actors or 4 actors;
doubling is indicated below.*

ADA BYRON LOVELACE — (18–36) Curious, funny, brilliant, aware of her brilliance, stories, aware of her story. Never met her famous father. Tries to be a “good girl” but just cannot help her curiosity and love of all things impossible. A woman of our time stuck in hers.

LADY ANABELLA BYRON — (35–55) Ada’s mother, harsh strict, jealous? Yes. But realistic. She has had a hard life largely due to Ada’s father. Projects his sins on her.

CHARLES BABBAGE — (40–60) Ada’s soul mate, friend, mentor. Lauded genius of London. A holder of famous salons, an inventor, a mathematical scholar, a dreamer who just cannot seem to make his dreams into the metal they require to be real. Almost perfect for Ada. Almost.

LORD LOVELACE — (25–45) A gentleman who becomes Ada’s husband. He’d rather that he was more rich and more lordly but he’ll manage with his lot. A proud man. A wanting man. A serious man. Is not madly in love with Ada but she’ll do just fine. *(Can be doubled with Byron.)*

MARY SOMMERVILLE — (40–60) Charles’ friend and colleague and Ada’s mentor. There are no women as successful and respected in science and math as her. Pragmatic, sharply friendly, someone who will tell you when you’re wrong. *(Can be doubled with Lady Anabella Byron.)*

BYRON — (36) A charming man, darkly funny, unpredictable, emotional, brooding but self-aware. A poet.

SETTING

England, 1835–1852.
The Victorian era. The houses of intellectual elites.

MUSIC

Aesthetic contradiction is fun. Since the play ends with a pop rock operatic blossoming of music, the rest of the play can wrestle with an anachronistic modern sound too. The ending musical moments may be choreographically as balletic or simplistic as you like. The song is critical, however, as Ada's biggest idea was her vision of a computer writing music.

“The engine might compose elaborate and scientific pieces of music of any degree of complexity or extent.”

—Ada Byron Lovelace, 1842

TRANSITIONS and LETTERS

Transitions should be active, fluid, and fun. When letters are delivered let them be buttressed by music, choreography, or physical storytelling. Let us see the life in these letters, most of which were actually written by the historical figures themselves.

FOR THE AUDIENCE

She Walks in Beauty

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

—Lord Byron, 1813

The Rainbow

Bow down in hope, in thanks, all ye who mourn;—
Where'in that peerless arche of radiant hues
Surpassing early tints,—the storm subdues!
Of nature's strife and tears 'tis heaven-born,
To soothe the sad, the sinning, and the forlorn;—
A lovely loving token to infuse;
The hope, the faith, that pow'r divine endures
With latent good, the woes by which we're torn.—

'Tis like a sweet repentance of the skies;
To beckon all those by sense of sin opprest,—
And prove what loveliness may spring from sighs!
A pledge:—that deep implanted in the breast
A hidden light may burn that never dies,
But bursts thro' clouds in purest hues exprest!

—Ada Byron Lovelace, 1850

*“But words are things, and a small drop of ink,
Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think.”*

—Lord Byron

ADA AND THE ENGINE

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Augusta Ada Byron stands in a lushly appointed room of her and her mother's house in London. She is 18, perpetually curious, slightly odd, and in an hour will be attending one of her first society events. She looks beautiful in a formal gown and jewels but doesn't look exactly comfortable in satin.

But this is Ada. And while other girls would be primping, she works on her mathematics. But how she works on maths is...musical. She hums as she works.

Then she sneaks a slim book of poems out from a hiding place.

She reads a poem that she knows by heart, but she still likes to see it on the page. Perhaps she touches it like a friend... like it's family.

The words become a simple song...

She softly taps the rhythm of the poem, its heartbeat, against her chest.

ADA. She walks in beauty like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her—

Lady Anabella Byron enters. She is Ada's mother, cold, perfect, bitter.

ANABELLA. Ada.

Ada hides the book behind a maths text.

ADA. Yes—What?—Ready—I'm ready—Are you ready? To go? Because I am. Ready. What?

ANABELLA. You are talking. Too much. It makes the rest of us uncomfortable.

ADA. Sorry. Is it the dress? I hate this dress. Or *dresses*. As a concept they are irrationally cumbersome and weighty in their diaphanous...ness.

ANABELLA. What did I just say?

ADA. Words. Too many. Sorry.

ANABELLA. *Ada.*

ADA. Yes.

ANABELLA. What are you reading?

ADA. Nothing. Maths. The new tutor suggested I work on a geometric progression but I'd rather focus on the factorization of primes—

ANABELLA. What. Are you reading.

*She is caught. Hands her mother the book of poems.
Anabella recognizes it immediately, hates it...
And starts to calmly rip out each page as she talks.
Ada winces at every page.*

Daughter. We have so much against us already.

ADA. I'm so sorry, Mother.

ANABELLA. I don't think you are. I think you enjoy this rebellion. I think it lights you up, I think it fuels you.

ADA. I didn't mean to—I just found it—I didn't know it was his—

ANABELLA. This deception and defiance is at your core.

ADA. No, Mother please—

ANABELLA. Do you know *how* I come to know this?

ADA. Mother, please—

ANABELLA. Because *he* is rooted in you. You cannot help that you are his daughter—

ADA. No I cannot. Which is why I likewise cannot help my curiosity about him.

ANABELLA. *Know that he left you. Like any harlot he was done with.*

ADA. *Mother.*

ANABELLA. Darling if that shocks you, I'd drop the curiosity where you stand. Your father poisoned every pond he passed. He left wreckage and desperation and depravity with his every step. And I defied him. *I* did. For you. Now I know that you think you're very modern, but darling... what I had to do for you. *That* was unheard of. Women do not leave their husbands, even when their husbands are philandering, ne'er-do-well erotic obsessives.

ADA. You said he left us.

ANABELLA. He did. To wander the world from bed to bed. And yet, if I had not acted in the way I did to protect you from him fully and completely, you would have been taken from me and forced into your father's life. I fought for you in the courts, in the press. And what did he do?

He died sick and alone, mocked and sunk in the thought that no one loved him enough to save him from himself. Does that sound heroic? The genius Romantic? And yet the world gives him power through obsession.

ADA. He doesn't have any power, he's dead.

ANABELLA. That *is* power. Dead a decade and still haunts us with rumors vile and sticky. He is a constant downpour.

ADA. He's gone. Why shield me from him any longer?

ANABELLA. Not from him. From his nature in you.

ADA. I know what they say about him.

ANABELLA. Good. It's all true. The darker the truer.

ADA. They say that he was great. Flawed and—yes—dark, but a great genius of our age.

ANABELLA. Do not idealize him.

ADA. That's what we do with genius, and I hope there is some of that genius in me. I would better like to be dark and genius, than sunny and useless.

ANABELLA. You underestimate the vileness of his damage. Do not think his darkness was part of his genius. It cut his genius short, and it will do the same to you if you do not brace against it.

Ada hears this.

ADA. It's words, Mother. Just words. It's not an attack, it's only a poem.

ANABELLA. A poem you thought was about you, I'm sure. They all think his poems are about *them*.

That's exactly what Ada thought...

Don't be an idiot, darling. It's about some shivering bit of flesh from before you were born. I'm sure he abandoned her as soon as the lines were penned. Like you. Paste your name in a few lines, call it love, and never be seen again. That was his general *modus operandi*.

ADA. What lines? My name in his lines?

Will Anabella tell her the truth?

She finishes ripping the volume...but reserves one page.

ANABELLA. Canto Three. All for show of course. To lighten his image after he sailed away from you never to return. Who would abandon a child they loved? Who would fill a young girl's life with rumor and scandal she cannot ever escape?

Ada takes the page from Anabella and reads the passage.

Once you're married and you can't mess up your life any further, I'll answer any question you have about him, but not before. It's hard enough to find a man of worth to marry a strange girl, but more so when you have your very public lineage.

ADA. (*A fleeting edge of defiance.*) You married him, not I.

ANABELLA. (*Vicious.*) And when I see his instincts in yours I cringe, I weep, I long for the power to rip him from your fiber.

Pointed pause.

But tonight? Tonight we will give them nothing to whisper except compliments for your grace, your beauty, your deference. Tonight we prove our poise. Don't we?

ADA. Is this your debut or mine?

Anabella slaps her face.

ANABELLA. None of that cheek, my dear. That simply won't do.

ADA. Yes ma'am. I am sorry.

ANABELLA. Good. Posture.

ADA. Yes.

Ada straightens herself.

ANABELLA. Spin.

Ada spins for her mother to see her outfit. Small talk...

Your tutor tells me that you have almost completed the second book in the calculus series.

ADA. Yes. He is competent but not very interesting.

ANABELLA. Then let's try not to elope with this one shall we.

ADA. That was just once.

ANABELLA. For you, the difference between zero and one is your entire world.

Now. We shall have no discussion of tutors nor maths for the rest of the evening.

ADA. I'm not allowed to discuss maths at the party?

ANABELLA. Absolutely not.

ADA. But Mr. Babbage is the Lucasian Chair of *Mathematics*.

ANABELLA. I know who he is.

ADA. And Mrs. Sommerville. She has written tomes—

ANABELLA. And you are not there to discuss her tomes, you are there to find a husband.

ADA. Then why have me tutored in maths since I could talk and *not let me talk about it*.

ANABELLA. Because maths is the opposite of passion. It was necessary to direct your focus to keep you uncorrupted.

ADA. And despite your studies, he “corrupted” you.

ANABELLA. I will strike you again if you speak to me in that manner for one moment more.

ADA. And perhaps this time I will strike back.

A standoff between them.

ANABELLA. There he is. Right there. Under your skin. What must that feel like. Sickness? Itch? That's why they look at you, Ada, why they whisper. They wait to see you fall as he did. Fall into beds, into debt, into a depravity the complete description of which I have spared you thus far. And you will do well to swallow back any hint

ADA AND THE ENGINE

by Lauren Gunderson

3 men, 3 women (doubling/flexible casting)

As the British Industrial Revolution dawns, young Ada Byron Lovelace (daughter of the flamboyant and notorious Lord Byron) sees the boundless creative potential in the “analytic engines” of her friend and soul mate Charles Babbage, inventor of the first mechanical computer. Ada envisions a whole new world where art and information converge—a world she might not live to see. A music-laced story of love, friendship, and the edgiest dreams of the future. Jane Austen meets Steve Jobs in this poignant pre-tech romance heralding the computer age.

“Gunderson finds plenty of intriguing matter in the...story she tells, zeroing in on the knowns and unknowns in the relationship between Ada and Charles Babbage... Gunderson’s wit...[makes] the story pretty irresistible.”

—San Francisco Chronicle

“...wise and witty... [a] very smart and skillful Victorian parlor drama.”

—SF Weekly

“Gunderson...has done a terrific job transforming Ada’s story. ...The [script is] succinct and pithy, moving story and emotions along at the clip of an electronically infused calculation.”

—RepeatPerformances.org

“What Gunderson achieves in ADA AND THE ENGINE is quite remarkable. She manages to capture the cognitive energy and intellectual intimacy that can strengthen a friendship... ADA AND THE ENGINE is a rare and special artistic achievement: an intelligent play about intelligent historical people that has been crafted by intelligent theatre artists for an intelligent audience.”

—MyCulturalLandscape.com

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DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC.

ISBN 978-0-8222-3770-9



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