

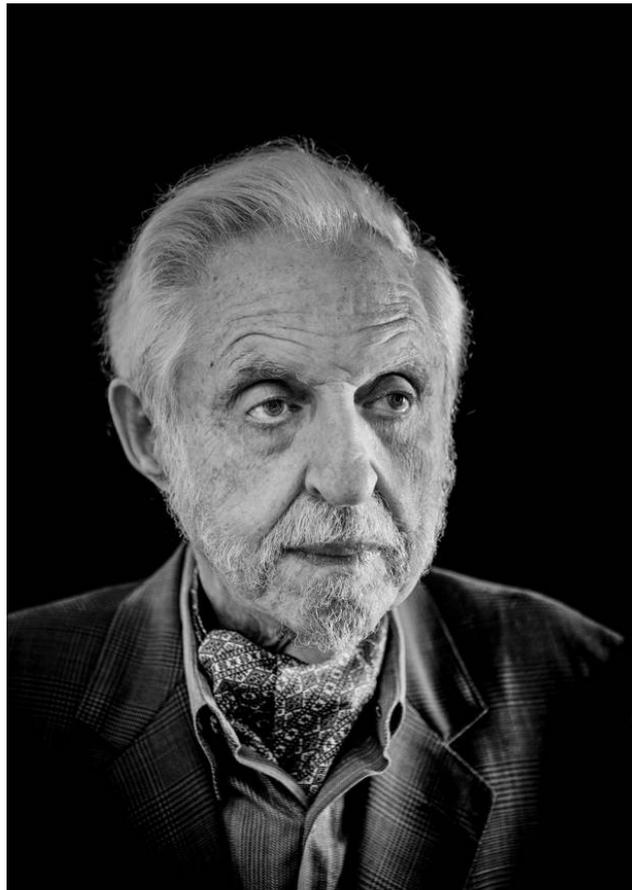


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## Carl Djerassi: 'We know exactly how to develop the male pill, but there's not a single pharmaceutical company that will touch it'



He invented the Pill, helped discover antihistamines and published 1,200 scientific papers. Then Carl Djerassi ended his stellar career to begin writing (and to avenge a cheating lover). But as the workaholic 90-year-old admits, the clock is ticking

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Well, this could be awkward. I've barely sat down in Carl Djerassi's spectacular west London apartment and what does the so-called father of the Pill bark at me in his Austrian-accented English? Yup, he bans all talk of the oral contraceptive that changed the world. And to think I'd been worrying about discussing foreplay with a nonagenarian!

"Quite frankly, I was 28 years old when I worked on the Pill and the implication is always that I have twiddled my thumbs from age 28 to age 90. Really, I have been leading a totally different life for the past 25 years and it's that which ought to be of interest." That's me told.

Djerassi is referring to his latest incarnation as a playwright because, yes, I really am here to talk about foreplay – or rather Foreplay, his new

stage drama, which has its world premiere next month. Although frankly there's no way that Djerassi's previous life is not going to come up: in 1951, he led the work to produce the world's first synthetic version of progesterone – a steroid hormone pumped out by the body to maintain pregnancy – that could be taken by mouth.

But he's not wrong in insisting that, "Older people can reinvent themselves and stay alive and productive – an important lesson in an ever-aging society." And boy is Djerassi productive! A multimillionaire widower who describes himself as an "intellectual polygamist", he has written around two-dozen books since producing his first novel in 1983 "out of revenge". (The love of his life had ditched him for a professor of literature, so the famous chemist decided to play him at his own game.)

He gestures to some packed shelves, easing himself up from a leather sofa to pull out a handful in evidence (once a scientist, always a scientist). I'm slightly worried he plans to keep me here until I've worked my way through the entire library, spanning translations in Catalan and Korean; his stipulations before we met included watching several videos on his personal website plus a DVD he sent to me at home of – get this – "A Special Celebration of Carl Djerassi", made to celebrate his 90th birthday by Stanford University, where he has taught chemistry since 1959.

One video shows him working out, crutch and all – he has a fused left knee after a skiing accident but takes keeping fit as seriously as the rest of his life, hence his beefy personal trainer. The motivational highlights on show include: "I could balance a nickel on that 90-year-old ass," and, as the trainer prods Djerassi mid sit-up: "Even my titanium thumb can't get through those abs." Djerassi later confesses his vanity to our photographer, getting a scarf to hide what he thinks is his turkey neck, developed only after developing tongue cancer.

Even in his 10th decade, he has no intention of slowing down. He is ready for me at 8.30am and once we're done, accompanies me to the Tube (he hates displaying his wealth so takes the Underground everywhere in London and Vienna, the two cities he "commutes" between when not at his 12,000-acre Californian ranch).



Carl Djerassi (right) carousing with the playwright Tom Stoppard in the mid-1970s, taken from 'The Pill, Pygmy Chimps, and Degas' Horse: An Autobiography' (out now as an ebook)

After a day at a rehearsal of *Foreplay*, Djerassi will watch a play that evening at the National Theatre. Just after midnight, he emails me with his latest autobiography. Yet he calls his "preoccupation with time" his life's biggest regret. "I'm very impatient. I feel I don't have enough time to still do all the things that I want to do, instead of recognising that it's impossible anyway. That's a prescription for, I won't say unhappiness, but it's a prescription for discontent. If I'd realised this 50 years ago maybe I would not have been married three times but only once." (He had two children, although his daughter Pamela committed suicide aged 28.)

He writes to "smuggle" science into literature and, since the late 1990s, the theatre, by creating dramas about serious topics such as male infertility and the in-vitro fertilisation procedure ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection, a test-tube technique developed to assist conception for men with a low sperm count).

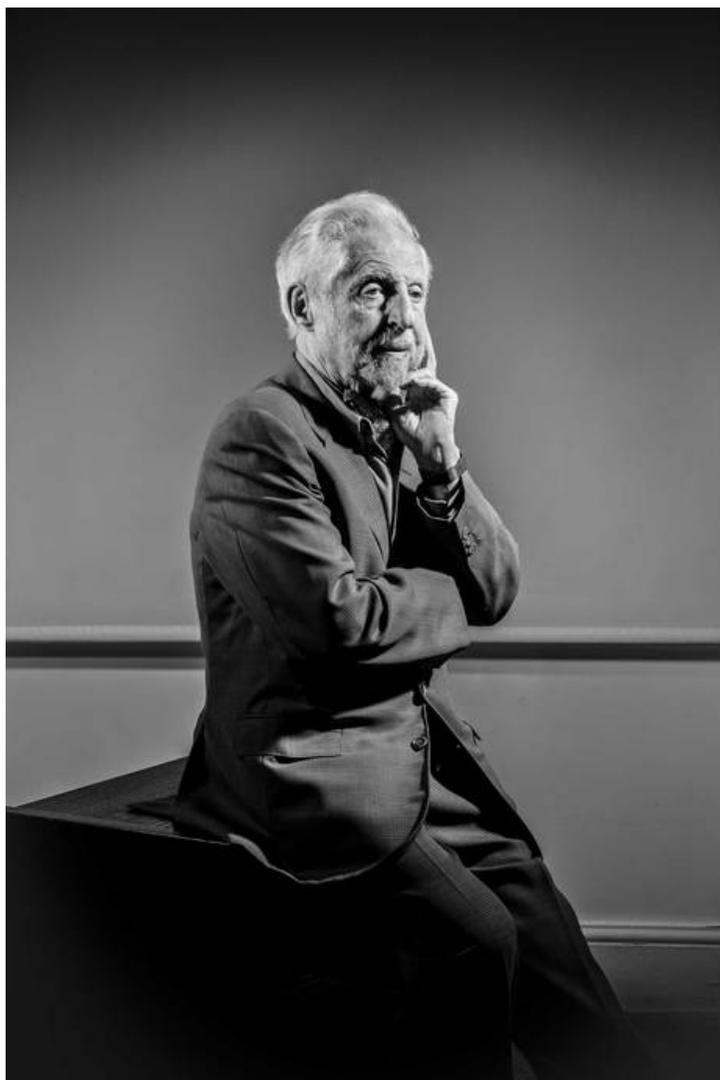
But his work, although critically acclaimed, can suffer from a perception problem. Andy Jordan, the British director who has produced all of Djerassi's previous eight plays in Britain, admits

potential audiences can – wrongly – think they are "esoteric and very, very niche" because of the focus on science.

*Foreplay*, at least, tackles a different topic: political theory. Or rather theorists – four of them: Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and his wife Gretel. I've read the script, which Djerassi says is really about "sex and jealousy". He changed tack from science to avoid being "typed". I find it riveting and hope it does well.

Djerassi admits it hasn't been easy. "I sit between two chairs. Scientists think you just play around when you write plays. To them, I've abandoned something very important and have gone to do something trivial. To theatre people, it's exactly the other way round. Most non-scientists, particularly in the arts, think science and technology are taking over the world. They say, 'Here comes a scientist and now he wants to take over the theatre as well. We'll show him.' I have a desire to write plays that have scientists as characters because I'm an inveterate theatre-goer and I was always depressed by the fact that, apart from *Frankenstein* and a few things like that, we either are not in the theatre or we're idiots savants or nerds."

The major exception, he points out, is Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*. But, doctors apart (notably Chekhov), scientists just don't write plays. "Physicians write. They deal with human beings; that's what plays are about. But you don't see any plays about chemistry or chemists for the



Djerassi says: 'I'm very impatient. I feel I don't have enough time to still do all the things that I want to do' (David Yeo)

simple reason that chemistry is about molecules. How do you reduce molecules? It has to do with the behaviour of the person who handles the molecules."

Djerassi has handled molecules professionally since he was 18, graduating early from university in Ohio. Born in Vienna in 1923 to an Austrian mother and Bulgarian father, he fled Austria, where he grew up with his mother (his parents divorced), after the Anschluss, emigrating to the US shortly after.

An early coup was helping to discover the first antihistamines in his first job, and he never looked back, publishing more than 1,200 articles on his findings. The trouble is, without a chemistry degree or the benefit of having seen one of his plays, it's hard to decipher his vast scientific achievements – for instance, "bringing physical methods to the structural elucidation of organic compounds such as optical dispersion, circular dichroism and mass spectrometry".

So, it's back to the Pill, which, despite his earlier intransigence, Djerassi is happy to discuss when I slip in a question about its impact on power relationships between the sexes (a favourite topic of discussion between him and his late wife, the biographer and feminist-studies professor Diane Middlebrook). "You could have sex for fun without worrying about the reproductive consequences, which were, before, the controlling mechanism for screwing around, so to speak – the fear of inadvertent pregnancy."

He should know: before the Pill was given the green light in America in 1960, his first, childless, marriage ended in divorce after he made a lover, Norma, pregnant – "The condom broke." He did the right thing, marrying her; Pamela was born in 1950 and a son, Dale, followed three years later. "It's almost inconceivable now, but this was in my lifetime, 60 years ago."

The next step, as he sees it, is to liberate women's fertility, something that started with the invention of IVF in 1977. This is a necessity

because women are putting off motherhood to compete with men in the workplace. "I predicted it for the first time in my writing, in my first play *An Immaculate Misconception* – you can see the place, right here," he says, reaching again for the shelves and turning to page 21 where Melanie, a reproductive scientist, says: "Young men and women will open reproductive bank accounts full of frozen sperm and eggs. And when they want a baby, they'll go to the bank to check out what they need." Her colleague Frankenthaler asks: "And once they have such a bank account... get sterilised?" Melanie again: "Exactly. If my prediction is on target, contraception will become superfluous."

Djerassi believes the future of contraception lies in sterilisation. His big prediction for the next 30 years is that, "IVF will start to be practised by fertile women," who will use the healthy eggs they froze in their twenties to have perfect babies.

"Abortion won't exist any more because you'll have a desired child; a desired child is a loved child; and a loved child is the greatest cement for a relationship between a man and a woman, so people who say these are test-tube babies who destroy the nuclear family – this is hogwash. It will be exactly the other way round."

Djerassi himself was snipped in his early fifties; his daughter was sterilised at 25, convinced the world didn't need more babies and she'd adopt if necessary. But will there be a male Pill? "Never. This has nothing to do with science; we know exactly how to develop them. But there's not a single pharmaceutical company that will touch this, for economic and socio-political rather than scientific reasons. Their focus is on diseases of a geriatric population: diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular, Alzheimer's. Male contraception is nothing compared with an anti-obesity drug. Plus, men are preoccupied with the side-effects. Men who start taking it at 18 will ask, 'Will I still be able to have a child 30 years later?' How do you answer? To prove that is monstrously difficult and expensive. No one would spend that amount of money."

You wouldn't want to bet against Djerassi sticking around to see his predictions come true. He's more 90-going-on-70. I forget to ask his secret but if he could put that in a pill, he really would be on to a winner. Then he wouldn't have to worry about time running out.

*'Foreplay'* is at the King's Head Theatre, London N1 ([kingsheadtheatre.com](http://kingsheadtheatre.com)), from 30 April to 31 May