

[Let Newton Be!](#)

Mark Henderson 1 hour ago



GUEST POST BY CRAIG BAXTER

Photo: Kate Maylon, by Jaimie Grimston

Let Newton Be! is a new verbatim play about Isaac Newton. The script is constructed entirely from the letters, notes, published and unpublished works of Newton and his immediate contemporaries. The play was commissioned by the [Faraday Institute](#) and is produced by [Menagerie Theatre Company](#).

In 2009 I wrote a stage dramatization for the [Darwin Correspondence Project](#) of the letters that passed between Charles Darwin and the American botanist Asa Gray. Re:Design focussed on the interplay between Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection and the religious ideas of his time. Although constructed entirely from historical documents, the dramatization's theme seemed resonant for audiences today, touching as it did upon the fundamental meanings of life, death, the Universe and everything.

So, when Denis Alexander, the Director of the Faraday Institute, approached me with the idea of doing another verbatim play, this time about Isaac Newton, I jumped at the chance. It became the most difficult writing job I've tackled.

The source material turned out to be pretty intimidating. Newton was a prolific writer and re-writer, and much of what he wrote (or rather scrawled) was never intended for anyone else's eyes. His major published works, Principia and Opticks do not make for easy reading. Seven volumes of correspondence are hard enough to lift, let alone work your way through. Some excellent online resources, notably the [Newton Project](#) and the [Newton Project Canada](#) and biographies were lifesavers and helped me pick a theatrical path through the dense forest of history, philosophy, character and maths.

Newton turns out to be a very different subject to Darwin. Whereas Darwin is affable, charming, funny, open-minded, Newton is difficult, truculent, secretive, often deliberately abstruse. Whereas Darwin had strong family bonds and warm friendships lasting decades, Newton - for much of his life - preferred to live and work in isolation. But today they do have this in common: both men's personal attitudes towards religion are often popularly misunderstood and misrepresented.

Darwin - still a contentious figure in many parts of the world - was a self-professed agnostic but was by no means anti-religion. Similarly, the popular impression of Newton is that he was a proto-rationalist, a founding father of the scientific way of thinking often seen as being completely at odds with religion. But Newton was far from being an atheistic promoter of a mechanical godless Universe. He was a deeply religious man, a true expert in scripture (which he studied every day) and church history.

Over his lifetime, he spent far more time considering prophesy and theology than he ever did gravity or optics (the things for which he continues to be justly celebrated today). For him, optics, geometry, mechanics, the calculus (or theory of fluxions as he called it) were there to back up the theology. For Newton, gravity - in which bodies exert influence over one another without direct contact - was evidence of the power of God's divine will and of a continued, active engagement of Creator with Creation. In its biographical, historical context, Newton's groundbreaking science was never set up in opposition to religion (at least not by Newton).

In fact, without his fundamental belief in this all-powerful and ever-present God of Dominion, expressing his power through invisible forces, it seems unlikely that Newton would ever have conceived his revolutionary laws of motion.

And so the raw material - once I could see the wood for the trees - proved fascinating. But the challenge in constructing the play was to make dry, dense, difficult and voluminous material accessible, or even understandable. As well as difficult raw material, I was faced with a difficult central character. Newton is frosty; he doesn't enjoy communicating with other people; he's struggling with subtle and complex concepts, and quite often (for reasons of personal safety) he doesn't even want to be understood. Famously, he's not very likeable.

So, if our dislikeable central character has no family or friends, who on earth is he going to talk to?

The solution turns out to be: himself.

Early on, I decided to present in *Let Newton Be!* a trinity of Newtons. Three separate yet connected characters: the boy Isack (all strangeness, creativity and wonder); the Cambridge Newton (the insular workaholic genius) and Sir Isaac Newton (the celebrated autocrat concerned with crushing opposition and cultivating his own semi-mythological status). There's a musical, rhythmic rule of three at the play's heart: three heretical anti-Trinitarian Newtons at Trinity College, Cambridge..

With the tripartite system established, I had to find and use source material that helped pin down the story of Newton's life, or shed light on his character, or reflected the central themes. To tell his story, using his words, from his point of view. Anything remotely resembling a joke went straight in. Or conflict (pretty essential for drama). Or manipulations, hidden agendas (where he is saying one thing but clearly meaning another). At other times it was simply a case of finding material to fill in the gaps: get us for example from Cambridge to London and back again. And so a painstaking, technical piece of dramatic construction (I hesitate to call it writing) slowly reached

completion and was handed over...

... and so in recent weeks director Patrick Morris, designer Issam Kourbaj and their [committed creative team](#) have been working to draw out the characters and themes of Let Newton Be! And, to my eye and ear, they have been wonderfully successful in creating a theatrical and engaging show with appeal across the Newtonian spectrum.

Three actors, three Newtons, on stage at all times, tell Newton's whole story from his own point of view; from childhood to deathbed; from Lincolnshire to the outer reaches of the Universe. They show, in an entertaining and yet uncompromising way, just how complex and remarkable (and even occasionally likeable) a man Isaac Newton was.

Let Newton Be! is showing at the York Science festival, the Cambridge Science Festival, at the Royal Society in London and at several other UK venues before embarking on a tour of North America. Full details [available here](#).