

# Program Note

## Sex in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction

*“The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition.”*

(from Walter Benjamin, **The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction**, 1936)

Impregnation of a woman’s egg by a fertile man in normal intercourse requires tens of millions of sperm—as many as 100 million in one ejaculate. Successful fertilization with one single sperm is a total impossibility, considering that a man ejaculating even 1 – 3 million sperm is functionally infertile. But in 1992, Gianpiero Palermo, Hubert Joris, Paul Devroey, and André C. Van Steirteghem from the University of Brussels published their sensational paper in *Lancet*, **340**, 17 (1992), in which they announced the successful fertilization of a human egg with a single sperm by direct injection under the microscope, followed by reinsertion of the egg into the woman’s uterus. ICSI—the accepted acronym for “intracytoplasmic sperm injection”—has now become the most powerful tool for the treatment of male infertility: over 10,000 ICSI babies have already been born since 1992.

This is the factual background of ICSI. But because “**An Immaculate Misconception**” is a play, all characters and events, though not the actual

science\*, are fictional—especially Dr. Melanie Laidlaw, ICSI’s putative inventor. ICSI’s ethical problems, however, remain even after the curtain has dropped.

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*\*The film of an ICSI procedure shown in Scene 5 is based on an actual fertilization conducted by Dr. Roger A. Pedersen of the University of California, San Francisco, while that in Scene 6 was performed by Dr. Barry R. Behr of Stanford University.*