

Blackfriars sows some 'Wild Oats'

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Sarah Fallon in "Wild Oats" / Michael Bailey/Submitted

Written by
Charles Culbertson
footlights and spotlights

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"Wild Oats," by Irish playwright John O'Keefe, might be the most delightful play you've never heard of.

Written in 1791, this comedy fell into obscurity over the years but began to make the rounds again in 1976 when it was rediscovered by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Its current revival is at the American Shakespeare Center's Blackfriars Playhouse. The play is a broad, over-the-top slice of nonsense that pays frequent homage to Shakespeare, but never approaches the Bard's exalted level of social or comedic commentary.

But that's OK, because the playwright most certainly never intended to do that. O'Keefe painted his characters with the broadest brush possible, slapped on a couple of layers of burlesque and trimmed with copious quantities of ham, all toward the end

of extolling the triumph of goodness and optimism. He achieved all these goals with stunning success.

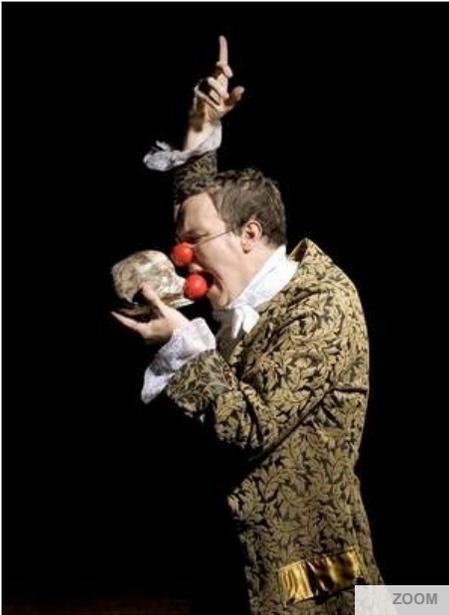
Because the play was written in the late 18th century, language isn't an appreciable obstacle. It's easy to understand, even though the plot is only marginally less labyrinthine than a Congressional bill. And once audiences realize that what they're seeing is a grand send-up from start to finish, it simply becomes a matter of strapping themselves in and enjoying an unruly theatrical roller-coaster ride.

James Keegan is a noisier- and bigger-than-life Sir George Thunder, a retired naval officer who worries about the serenity of his journey through life thanks to the wild oats he sowed as a young man. Keegan, of course, plays the part to the hilt, as does Patrick Midgley as his son, Harry, Paul Jennise as boatswain John Dory and Allison Glenzer as Muz, Harry's servant.

And with the seriously comedic talents of Sarah Fallon, Rene

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John Harrell in "Wild Oats." / Michael Bailey/Submitted

Thornton Jr., Bob Jones, Jeremiah Davis, Daniel Kennedy, Benjamin Curns, Chris Johnston, Ginna Hoben and Andrea Kelley in full swing, it's damned nigh impossible to misfire with a play such as "Wild Oats."

Although the story opens with and essentially revolves around Sir George Thunder, most of the limelight falls on Rover, an actor, and it is apparent O'Keeffe had the most fun developing this character. Like Bottom in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and Bayes in "The Rehearsal," Rover is a caricature of thespians all over the world, in every time period. He is a vain, egocentric but deeply likeable poseur who spends a great deal of his off-stage time quoting Shakespeare and other playwrights — sometimes accurately, sometimes not.

Before he goes onstage as Rover, John Harrell must surely hold a séance in which he channels the spirits of everyone who has ever faced the footlights. As he did with the character of Bottom in 2009, Harrell takes every opportunity to mercilessly and uproariously lampoon actors and acting, so much so that when he at one point actually says something serious, another character's line — "Ecod, he's not acting now" — draws a laugh from the audience. It's another brilliant performance from one of the ASC's most valuable players.

This thoroughly enjoyable version of "Wild Oats" is directed by Jim Warren.

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