



The Rehearsal

Special Affects

By George Villiers, Samuel Butler, Thomas Sprat, Martin Clifford
[American Shakespeare Center](#), Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, Va.
Saturday, November 14, 2009
Directed by Jim Warren

When it comes to ASC presenting a rarely or rarely performed 16th/17th century play, we no longer raise our eyebrows; we anticipate it like Christmas morning. What surprises, what joy, what gaiety is in store? And because this company seems like something of an old friend for us, having seen so many of its productions, it's also like a holiday family experience.

Santa did us big-time with *The Rehearsal*. A Restoration-written send-up of the heroic plays of the period, *The Rehearsal* centers on an artiste playwright named Bayes talking two gentlemen (one from the city, one from the country) through the dress rehearsal of his latest play "written in the latest fashion." Or, rather, he's claiming to get ahead of the latest fashion with new conventions (a dual-king kingdom with dual usurpers), reversed plotting (the usurpation comes before the reasoning), superfluous plot points (let's see, Prince Pretty-man was kidnapped as a baby by a fisherman whose death ripples upheavals through the land, though we've never even heard of this fisherman before), witty repartee (so witty it's incomprehensible), unexpected miracles (a dead lover is resurrected as a feast presented by the goddess bearing pie), ironic grand spectacle (the great battle represented by two actors in pantomime—and with guitars), and truly grand spectacle (an actual eclipse on stage!).

The visual, slapstick humor—starting with an overwrought Thunder and Lightning ballet as the prologue, running through pratfalls and the "Thriller" dance, and climaxing with the silly eclipse done to "Total Eclipse of the Heart"—would alone have carried the show. But that would have been ASC merely using a lost play to have fun. Rather, *The Rehearsal* is a most cleverly written satire, especially as Bayes snobbishly corrects the ignorant country gentleman whose entirely logical confusion he continually expresses in something like a Restoration version of "WTF?" In fact, some of the biggest laughs of the night were delivered by Luke Eddy's countryman, speaking astonishment in a Southern accent with impeccable sense of timing.

Then again, Eddy and his city friend, played by Allison Glenzer, were also sharing in the biggest laugh of the night. It was almost as if John Harrell as Orb, Chris Johnston as Sol, and Victoria Reinsel as Luna, along with Denice Burbach singing Bonnie Tyler's bombastic hit, had come up with the whole eclipse sequence back stage just before coming on, and Eddy and Glenzer were, like us, seeing it for the first time. Theirs was either uncontrolled corpsing or really great acting. [We learned a couple of years later that others in the acting company positioned themselves to watch the eclipse from backstage every performance.]

Everybody in the company gave incredible performances, whether physical (René Thornton Jr.'s "Thriller" dance even had me thrilled), spoken (Tobias Shaw's out-of-breath delivery of heroic verse), or in shades of character (John Harrell's put-upon actor playing one-dimensional parts). And in a tour de force role, presiding over all this manic mayhem was the maniciest, mayhemiest (a clever phrase Bayes himself would come up with, by the way) Christopher Seiler as Bayes, frantically antically conducting the players and audience (the two gentlemen and us) ensnared in his deluded creation.

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