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THEATER REVIEW

Globe embraces a bad girl's 'Fancy'

By Anne Marie Welsh
THEATER CRITIC

November 16, 2004

For two centuries, playwright Aphra Behn was a feminine footnote to the history of the great comic drama that blossomed when evangelical Puritans lost their sway and theaters reopened during the English Restoration (1660-1700).

Literary and theater buffs knew the prolific poet laureate John Dryden and that racy pair of Williamses – Wycherly ("The Country Wife") and Congreve ("The Way of the World"). Theaters staged their witty and sexually frank plays regularly from then right up until the present. Yet the equally titillating "The Rover" or "Sir Patient Fancy" by Behn were seldom read and never performed.

When Behn – a sometime-spy, jailed debtor, novelist and playwright – was mentioned, her moniker "the licentious Mrs. Behn" defined her as naughtily subversive. She was the bad girl that the better sort of women writers (read: idealizing, moralistic) were not supposed to emulate.

Well, the canon of Western literature, like so much else after the 1960s, has expanded. With women (some men, too) rewriting literary and theatrical history by exhuming Behn's work, she's been joyfully embraced as the first English woman to earn a living writing for the stage.

Virginia Woolf praised her in "A Room of One's Own," saying that "All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is, most scandalously but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the



J.T. McMILLAN

Isabella Fancy (Zura Young) discovers her stepmother (Eve Danzeisen) in bed with her own young suitor, Lodwick (Brian Bielawski), in "Sir Patient Fancy."

DATEBOOK

"Sir Patient Fancy"
7 tonight and tomorrow,
8 p.m. Thursday and

right to speak their minds. It is she – shady and amorous as she was – who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you tonight: 'Earn 500 a year by your wits.' "

The Globe/USD professional actor training program has now staged the West Coast premiere of Behn's "Sir Patient Fancy" in an entertaining, opulently costumed production directed by Brendon Fox and running through Sunday.

The actors are MFA students; many appeared in the Globe Shakespeare Festival this summer. Most do well in the high-style antics of the two families Behn intertwines in a daisy chain of disguises, mistaken identities and assignations.

The Sir Patient of the title, for instance, is a Puritan left over from the Commonwealth, a naive spoilsport who's married a younger second wife playing him for a fool. Actor Matt Gaydow brings him to robust life, suggesting his joyless exterior is just that, a layer any human with appetites wishes stripped away. There's also a remarkable female character, Lady Knowell, heading the family next door; Carolyn Stone plays her with imperious relish and a dry wit.

Behn's comedy unfolds with the intricate plotting and scenic sweep of a novel. It's long, too – three hours, despite cutting and tweaking by veteran Globe dramaturg Dakin Matthews. Still, it's a welcome rarity, and fancy fun, as Fox maneuvers his love-starved couples, accompanied by spritely period music and dancing.

Another footnote

The USD/Globe professional theater training program is one of three here.

UCSD's Department of Theatre and Dance offers some of the boldest, freshest work in town. In a huge coincidence, a student-directed production of Strindberg's "A Dream Play" opens at the Mandell Weiss Forum tomorrow, even as Sledgehammer continues its run of the radical, little-seen play. Other highlights at UCSD are the local premiere of the fiercely gifted Suzan-Lori Parks' Hawthorne riff "F---ing A" in January and director Darko Tresnjak's staging of Marivaux's "La Dispute" in February. The UCSD sked is at www-theatre.ucsd.edu/onstage.

San Diego State's program, headed by Rick Simas, focuses upon musical theater, feeds performers to Starlight, Moonlight, the Welk and other professional venues, and scours the world for new musicals. This March, the program presents the San Diego premiere of "Bat Boy," a delightfully dark, iconoclastic rock musical that made a downtown NYC star of North County's Deven May in the title role in 2001. State's schedule:

<http://theatre.sdsu.edu> or (619) 594-6884.

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