

San Jose/Silicon Valley

Regional Reviews by [Eddie Reynolds](#)

Or,

Dragon Productions Theatre Company

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The plague has ravaged, a fire has leveled, and seemingly endless wars have demoralized a late 1660s London that is also still trying to recover from eleven years of so-called moral cleansing by anti-monarchist Oliver Cromwell. Like a Phoenix rising from the flames and ashes, the once-banned theatres begin to rebuild, bolstered in the efforts by three women (producer, playwright, and actress) and a king who clearly likes his wine, women, and live stage performances. Dragon Theatre presents an historically accurate (with sufficient artistic liberties, of course) accounting of the intertwined lives and loves of theatre owner Lady Davenant, spy-turned-playwright Aphra Behn, much-sought consort and comic actress Nell Gwyn, and "Merry Monarch" King Charles II in Liz Duffy Adams' captivating and insightful *Or*.



Kathryn Hart

Aphra Behn has spent years traveling the world, spying for the restored Charles II to route out and expose enemies coming at him from all sides, only to end up in debtor's prison where we find her at the play's beginning. Kathryn Hart is the tall, intense, exotically beautiful Aphra who has decided to forego further spying to plunge fiercely into becoming the country's first and foremost female playwright. She is surprisingly rescued from poverty by a masked and coy king (Michael Wayne Rice) who is grateful for her past service and is soon attracted to her luscious form and lips (as well as her wit and ability to rhyme on the spot).

While Ms. Behn is a bit hesitant and not totally convincing in her opening solo spots, she begins to warm to the role of Aphra as the attraction between her and Charles heats up. She really blossoms and comes alive when, back at her simple but richly draped and carpeted flat (designed by David Tousley), she is visited by the boyish but bosomed Nell Gwynne (Naomi Evans). The sparks that erupt between them engender both immediate friendship and lust; and our Aphra emerges as a "modern" woman who loves bantering in double entendres, collapsing into waiting arms for a kiss or three, and then dashing to her desk to write another few lines of verse.

As the play progresses and more surprise guests appear, while other guests duck and hide in increasingly comic form, Kathryn Hart's Aphra Behn convinces us she is a woman who has the wherewithal to maneuver a king's ego for his and her benefit, orchestrate in full command a triangular love affair, outsmart a blackmailing past lover, and still pull an all-nighter to produce her first hit play.

Naomi Evans is deliciously devilish and delightful as the gender-bending Nell Gwynn who is quite willing

to play both sides of the love fence with grit and gusto. Every time she emerges on stage, she brightens the set with boyish charm that screams femininity and a command of well-timed, back-and-forth badinage with first Aphra and later Charles. As she is time and again sent to hide in the back bedroom, Nell is hilarious as she repeatedly emerges, frustrated that she did not hear what was going on between Aphra and the latest guest and saying "What is the door made of anyway?" — something doubly funny for us as audience who only see a curtained door in this production.

Michael Wayne Rice doubles as the rather playful, hungry-for-a-romp King Charles II as well as Aphra's former fellow spy and lover William Scot, banished by Charles II as son of Thomas Scot who helped kill Charles I. As William, Mr. Rice is particularly noteworthy as a wide-eyed, stammering, constantly nervous desperado who tries all means available to him (lies, threats, and sloppy kisses) to convince Aphra to plead for his clemency (and to get him a decent carafe of wine). His stage presence brings together sleaze and silliness for a fun performance, made the more noteworthy because both King and fiend had to hobble on cane and in probable pain all night due to a recent foot injury of Mr. Rice's.

Even with the fine performances of the above three, the biggest laughs and the eruptions of mid-scene applause came each time Doll Piccotto plodded up the aisle and onto the set in one of two mouthwatering roles. Theatre owner Lady Davenant is looking for a "comic tragedy" that might be "filled out with a song or two," and she needs it the very next morning. The crackling, high voiced aristocrat—audaciously outfitted in feathered hat and velvet cape that could cover an acre field—enters crying, "I need a play, I need a play." Scarcely breathing, she talks in paragraph-long sentences with no pause and no chance for the astounded but fascinated Aphra to respond. In hilarious contrast, Ms. Piccotto's Maria (Aphra's loyal servant of many years) is more in command than in service, stomps and slumps at the same time as she moves in and out, and is both affronting and adoring in her chattering with Aphra.

Vera Sloan directs the sudden comings and goings of Aphra's guests and servant (all in eye-catching costumes by Rebecca Heine) with tongue-in-cheek and alertness to perfect timing. While this small stage and set choices unfortunately do not allow the slamming doors and multiple entrances in all directions that I saw in an earlier production, much humor still occurs with the hide-and-seek ploys that occur and the quick changes actors undergo in their multiple roles. Brittany S. Mellerson surrounds us with music that both evokes the period as well as winks at the modern-sounding script of Ms. Adams.

And it is the modern-day feel to this 350+-year-old story that is the crowning effect of the playwright and the director. At one point, Aphra pines for "a sylvan age ... a gilded age ... sweet Arcadia" of years gone by that she believes much better than the present. Nell abruptly comes back with, "Don't be such a nostalgia queen ... The world is changing." We see a late seventeenth century England that is changing and yet is shockingly much like our contemporary, also changing world. Women surge forward against all odds to take on leadership in the arts in roles once reserved just for men. Men and women alike are not shocked by a little same- and cross-sex playing or by some cross-dressing in every day life. Four-letter words are said in jest and earnest and without much notice. Former, revered hierarchies are still honored when need be but are ignored with glee when possible. *Or*, admonishes us not to look back too far for what was different from today because yesterday, today, and tomorrow are probably all quite similar when people are involved.

Dragon Theatre admirably has staged a fun play with heart and meaning. To Redwood City all should go to see what modern tales lie in yesteryear.

Or, continues through October 25, 2015, at Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway Street, Redwood City. Tickets are available at www.dragonproductions.net or by calling 650-493-2006.

Photo James Kasyan