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In His Majesty's service

"Or" explores the fascinating life of playwright, spy Aphra Behn

by [Karla Kane](#) / Palo Alto Weekly

Aphra Behn led a dramatic life, in several senses of the term. To quote Virginia Woolf, "All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn ... for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds."

In her 2009 play, currently presented by Redwood City's Dragon Theatre, Liz Duffy Adams offers a window into Behn's adventuresome existence.

Behn gained fame as one of the first Englishwomen to succeed as a professional writer. She lived in the Restoration era, when King Charles II ushered in a new age of artistry and glamour after the bleak, brief Republican period. An accomplished and prolific poet, playwright and novelist, Behn was a post-Renaissance woman ahead of her time. But in addition to her literary prowess, she worked as a spy in His Majesty's service, reporting on the dealings of those in foreign lands who would plot against the king.

"Or," is a cheeky, delectable peach of a play that mainly takes place over the course of one evening. As a reward for her underpaid years of expensive, dangerous work as a spy as well as for her own personal charm, Behn (Kathryn Han) has been given the secret patronage of the king (Michael Wayne Rice). This allows her to live in comfort in her posh London home of the late 1660s and to work toward achieving her dream of becoming a professional playwright. She's also the king's mistress -- one of many, it seems -- but lives a happily independent life, aided by her faithful longtime servant, Maria (Doll Piccotto).

Behn is even hooked up, both romantically and theatrically, with toast-of-the-town actress/courtesan/social butterfly Nell Gwyn (Naomi Evans), for whom she also plays matchmaker with King Charles (in real life, Gwyn and the king were indeed in a long-term relationship). Best of all, Behn has been hired to provide a play to a newly restored theater company, led by the daffy, ebullient Lady Davenant (Piccotto again).

The only trouble is, while the king and Gwyn frolic in the boudoir and Behn struggles to finish her play on a tight deadline, a shady character from her past



In "Or," Kathryn Han plays 17th-century English playwright and spy Aphra Behn; Michael Wayne Rice plays both King Charles and double-agent William Scot. Photo by Lance Huntley.



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turns up to complicate matters. William Scot (also Rice, in the show's second dual role) was Behn's former lover and a fellow spy but got himself into trouble as a double agent. He wants Behn's help in exposing an alleged, dubious assassination plot against the sovereign. Meanwhile, King Charles wants her to deliver Scot to him as a traitor. The fact that both men are played by the same actor adds an extra layer of pleasing complexity to the already convoluted plot.

Little is known about the real Behn's backstory, and Adams' play doesn't purport to be historically accurate, but the world described and presented by the vivacious Gwyn is irresistible -- a golden age of free love and fluid sexual orientation, a flourishing of fashion and fun and new-found opportunities for women. Unabashedly ambitious Behn and frivolous Gwyn seemingly aren't concerned with progressive ideals or social justice. Nevertheless, one can't help but see them as feminist trailblazers.

Since it's a play about a playwright, "Or," contains some winking nods to the overlap between Behn's "real" life and her work. ("Just write me one of those clever servant parts," clever servant Maria declares.) Adams also mixes period language in the style of Behn's own Restoration-era prose (or, as the case may be, rhymes), with modern, conversational dialogue. The actors switch back and forth between the styles seamlessly. Speaking of switching, Rice is excellent as both the smoothly charming monarch and the jittery, down-on-his luck Scot.

"Or," is partly a farce, with characters bursting in and out of rooms while Behn tries to keep things from unraveling, and Rice's quick changes between his two roles heightens the comic aspect nicely. The other actor doing double duty, Piccotto, has one of the best scenes in the show as Lady Davenant, whose few moments on stage are among the most memorable. Evans is appealingly saucy as Gwyn, and Han is plenty capable in her leading role.

Puritans take heed: "Or," is full of "adult" language and situations, much like Behn's own works. But for those who like their farces with a dash of lit-class flair, this relatively brief production (90 minutes, no intermission) is a smart and sexy look at a fascinating figure, whose life was certainly stage-worthy.

What: "Or," by Liz Duffy Adams

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway, Redwood City

When: Through Oct. 25. Thursday-Saturday, 8 p.m.; Sunday, 2 p.m. Post-show discussion Sunday, Oct. 18.

Cost: \$27-\$35

Info: Go to dragonproductions.net or call 650-493-2006.

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