

Hanky panky and the first woman playwright

It seems odd to hear pop music playing just before the start of a 17th century play with the rather illusive title of "Or," on stage through Oct. 25 at the Dragon Theatre in Redwood City.

In fact, it's right in keeping with a lot of what playwright Liz Duffy Adams mashes together in "Or," so that one moment the audience sees English poet Aphra Behn in a debtor's prison, dashing off a somewhat chastising letter to King Charles II ("Here in debtor's prison I do lie ... for lack of funds promised me as your spy"), then suddenly hearing language that is straight out of 1960 America, where free love and sexual innuendo is bantered about willy-nilly.

Though she's not well known in this country, Behn is considered the first woman to make a living as a playwright in England. (She's actually buried in Westminster Abbey -- a rarity for any women of that era.)

So, yes, this is a historical play, but Adams doesn't let this get in the way of some sparkling dialogue, lots of sexual dalliances, plus the aforementioned modern-day American touches. In other words, she certainly takes liberties with the facts when it suits her. Yet she also includes some well-researched biographical data, as well as 17th century cultural material.

Heady stuff, and not exactly every theatergoer's favorite way to spend an evening. But the dialogue, delivered swiftly and with grit by all four cast members, is actually quite witty, and the bedroom shenanigans are hilarious.

Before the play opens, a luscious, devilish Kathryn Han, as Behn, delivers a cleverly rhymed prologue to explain both the play and its rather ambiguous title. What comes next, she says, includes many things which may seem opposites: Now or then; wrong or righteous; love or lust; male or female (or both).

Then actors come on stage to dress her appropriately as the play begins.

Remember that letter Behn is writing in prison? Suddenly a masked stranger enters her cell, entices her with her freedom (in exchange for a kiss), and when the stranger turns out to be King Charles himself, who's looking for another mistress ... well, suffice to say Charles has more than met his match in Adams' Behn.

The 90-minute play (without an intermission) moves along quickly, under the adept

direction of Vera Sloan and with a seasoned quartet of actors. As Nell Gwynne, a sometimes prostitute/sometimes actress, Naomi Evans is all youthful, wide-eyed innocence, who loves both a woman and man, lustily and sweetly.

Doll Piccotto is charming as Behn's maidservant, Maria, but as Lady Davenant, she ramps it up about 18 notches and is well-nigh extraordinary. The lone male cast member, Michael Wayne Rice, is both Charles II and William Scot (sometimes almost at the same time), and he comes close to holding his own with these remarkable women -- despite a 21st century injury that caused him to use a cane intermittently and wear an open-toed sandal on one foot. This was only a slight distraction, although occasionally it sounds as if he is stumbling backstage, as he rushes out one door and in another (and wearing a different costume).

Because Behn is a poet and budding playwright, Duffy gives her a lot of prosaic dialogue. Speaking to Charles at one point, she tells him "Power needs poets; poets need money." At another point she tells William (her former spy cohort and lover) "You're trembling like a virgin." Still later she explains to Charles that she won't allow him to make love to her because "I don't want to get knocked up," and one time she tells him "I can't ask you to stay ... I've got a play to finish." Duffy's oeuvre is tres magnifique!

David Tousley's comfortably furnished apartment set features a period writing desk, a red plush chaise lounge and long black curtains with red panels. At times, lighting designer Dena Burd brings a soft pinkish hue to the entire stage, which adds an extra dimension, and Brittany S. Mellerson's sound makes almost every syllable understandable.

Rebecca Heine's sometimes-lush, frequently authentic-looking Restoration-era costumes also add to this production.

Be forewarned that this is a play that uses many swear words and a number of very suggestive engagements as well as the sharing of passionate kisses and a blatant intimation of a ménage à trois. Even the Dragon website advises that it's R-rated.

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Theater

What: "Or,"

By: Liz Duffy Adams

Directed by: Vera Sloan

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Oct. 25

Tickets: \$27-35; 650-493-2006 or www.dragonproductions.net