



Review: Compleat female stage beauty

Description

Persephone presents a beautiful show.

By Byron Toben



Thomas Wilkinson-Fullerton and Emelia Hellman

English theatre really flourished in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Her favourite, one William



~~Shakespeare, was was aided and abetted by Ben Johnson and Christopher Marlowe. Their timeless dramas flourished despite her death in 1603.~~

However, the English customs persisted in their not allowing females to act on stage as was gradually being accepted in France. This was the situation thru James I (he of the King James Bible) and his son, Charles I, whose fights with Parliament led to the English Civil War, during which Puritan forces under Oliver Cromwell (The Roundheads) discouraged theatre in general and enacted a law officially banning women from performing on stage.

Upon the restoration of the Stuart dynasty under the hedonistic Charles II, The Lord then worked in a wondrous way her miracle to perform. This is how: Charles's favorite mistress was a brash 15 year old orange seller that chanced to fancy, (shades of Eliza Doolittle!) the famous Nell Gwynn. Under her urgings, he revoked the Ban in 1661 and, steadily, women actually played women before the footlights. It was with this background that American playwright Jeffrey Hatcher (a prolific guy, 30 plays, 4 screenplays) wrote this one. His works caught the eye of long-time Westmount resident Gabrielle Soskin, founder of the respected Persephone Productions who, with her co-artistic director, Christopher Moore, had presented Hatcher's adaptation of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde last April.

The play cleverly uses the quintessential 16th century diarist Samuel Pepys (Brian Libero) as the narrator of the piece. The crucial role of Nell Gwyn (delivered comically by Alex Petrachuk) blends well with the high living King Charles (Martin Law).

The most frequent test for wannabe female tragedians was Desdemona from Shakespeare's Othello. The leading female impersonator of the day was Edward "Ned" Kynaston (terrific incarnation by Thomas Wilkerson-Fullerton) and the villainous Moor (Mr Moore as company owner Thomas Betterton).



Also notable in the large cast of 14 playing 22 roles were Emilia

Hellman as Margaret, the company's dresser, Lucas DiTecco as Sir Charles Sedley and James Harrington as George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, both avowed enemies of Kynaston. It is amazing how Ms Soskin, retired drama teacher, constantly discovers recent grads that perform so professionally in Persephone shows.

Speaking of which, Persephone's next show is an adaptation of Moby Dick written by Jim Burke before his selection as the Gazette's new theatre critic. That will run February 11 to 21.

Also, apropos of Stage Beauty, sometime in the spring, yours truly plans to produce a one night dramatic reading of G. Bernard Shaws's 1939 In Good King Charles Golden Days, which takes place in Isaac Newton's house in 1680. The restoration continues!

Compleat Female Stage Beauty ran from October 15 to 25 at Théâtre Calixa-Lavallée.



Images: Chris Moore

Byron Toben is the immediate past-president of the Montreal Press Club.

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