



The Rover may herald
an Aphra Behn revival

Description

The NTS presents a fast-paced production of her most popular play

By **Byron Toben**

The amazing life of Aphra Behn would itself make an interesting play. Born in 1640, she lived through the puritanical times of the English Interregnum when theatre and even Christmas celebrations were greatly limited in scope by the governing Parliament until the restoration of the monarchy with Charles II in 1660. Somehow, she obtained a commission to serve Charles as a spy in the Netherlands but ended up broke back in London. Turning writer, she churned out 18 plays, as well as several novels and poetry collections before she died in 1689.

She became the only female playwright of that period whose works have survived until this day.

Locally, Paul Van Dyke directed a bang-up production of her *Oroonoco* (about black slavery) for Persephone Productions in 2013 and McGill English Department essayed her *The Rover* in 2016.

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Ms. Behn, buried in a remote corner of Westminster Abbey (as reported by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of Her Own*), was not a feminist as in today's terms. Who could be, in any country, given the pervasiveness of male supremacy until recent times? Women's right to vote, for instance, was only won so incredibly recently – 1917 in Canada (1940 in Quebec), 1920 in the USA, 1928 in Britain and Ireland, 1944 in France).

So, as pointed out by **Tadeusz Bradecki**, director of the recent *The Rover* by the graduating class of the **National Theatre School of Canada**, Behn had to accept the world as it was. Her men are brutal and violent, but the women smarter, so instead of complaining they enter the game of sex and power, often prevailing. This led to complaints in her day of bawdiness. But bawdiness sells, and even though she eventually died in poverty, she made a decent living for some years.

'Lots of duels and missed communications, but in the end, everyone ends up with their heart's desire...'



Watching this fast-paced production, I thought it could well have been entitled *The Runners* more than the mere *The Rovers*, as Mr. Bradecki had the 14 actors running at every entrance and exit. Well, at three hours, that may have been a stylistic way to keep audience attention.

Attention was certainly rapt during several sword-fighting scenes, involving capes as well as metal. The exacting swordplay even involved some humour in trying to place the swords back in scabbards. Bravo to fight captain **Charlotte Dennis**, who doubled as a whore, Lucinda.



The scene was set in Naples, where boisterous English

cavaliers come at carnival time for rest and relaxation, i.e. drinking, fighting and whoring. Belvile (**Gabriel Richardson**), one of the group, is desired by Spanish heiress Florinda (**Rosalie Trembley Johnston**) but since her father is away, she and her sister Hellena (**Shauna Thompson**) are governed by their brother Don Pedro (**Christopher Mejaki**). He plans to marry off Florinda to his buddy Don Antonio (**Jake Wilkinson**) and send Hellena to a nunnery.

Meanwhile, Willmore, the wandering rover (**Simon Gagnon**) shows up charming a leading courtesan, Angelica (**Eva Foote**), to give up her calling and wed him. This goes awry when he ends up with Hellena.

In the meantime, Blunt (**Robert Gerow**) a more bumbling cavalier, is robbed of purse and garb by Lucetta.

Lots of duels and missed communications, but in the end, everyone ends up with their heart's desire and the NTS churns out more talented actors for the Shakespeare and Shaw festivals, let alone other stage, film or TV careers.

The Rover ended at the Monument National on December 16.

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



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