

# PROSCENIUM

## **The Herbal Bed**

By Peter Whelan

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Wednesday 6th to Saturday 9th April, 2005  
Travellers Studio, Harrow Arts Centre

# The Herbal Bed

By  
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## CAST

Rafe Smith, a haberdasher ..... Michael Williams  
Hester Fletcher, a servant ..... Clare Wooster  
Jack Lane, a young gentleman ..... Rob Hurcam  
Bishop Parry of Worcester ..... Keith Bayross  
John Hall, physician of Stratford-upon-Avon ..... Mark Sutherland  
Susanna Hall, his wife ..... Izzie Cartwright  
Elizabeth Hall, their daughter ..... Clare Sutherland  
Barbanus Goche, Vicar-General ..... Julian Wood

Directed by ..... Jeanne Hawkes  
Set designed by ..... Erik Pearson  
Stage Manager ..... Erik Pearson  
Assisted by ..... Margaret Rudolph  
..... Jenny Glover  
..... Paul Davis  
Music recorded by ..... Barny Daley  
Costumes ..... Evelyn Moutrie  
Lighting and sound ..... Harrow Arts Culture

The action takes place in the garden of Doctor Hall's house (Hall's Croft as it stands today) and in Worcester Cathedral.

## Act One

Scene 1: June 1613

Scene 2: Half-an-hour later

Scene 3: Later that night

## Act Two

Scene 1: Two days later

Scene 2: Five weeks later

Scene 3: Some weeks later

## The Playwright

Peter Whelan was born in 1931 in Stoke-on-Trent, the Potteries. He was posted to Berlin in 1950 during his national Service and describes this as an intense and formative experience: *I must have gazed many a time across the moonscape ruins of Berlin, thinking of the shattered lives that were being lived there and of the legions of ghosts that haunted there, and wondering (theatre creature that I was) how I could write all this into a play.* Since the mid-1950s he has lived in London, working at first in the advertising business, and in 1957 he joined The Questors as an acting member. He contributed a one-act play *Oh Sisters* to a Questors new plays programme and this has been followed by a wide-ranging number of plays. Many of them have been premiered by the Royal Shakespeare Company and all are very precisely and distinctively set in time and place:

*Captain Swing* (The Other Place, Stratford, 1978) dealt with the mythical leader of the Captain Swing riots of 1830.

*The Accrington Pals* (Pit, London 1981) is set at the time of the First World War, and movingly examines the effect of the war on the volunteers, their friends, lovers and families in the Lancashire town.

*The Bright and Bold Design* (Pit, London 1991) is set in the Potteries in the 1930s in a factory making hand-painted pottery.

*The School of Night* (The Other Place, Stratford 1992) investigates the sixteenth century intellectual circle featuring Marlowe, Kyd and Raleigh and culminates in the murder of Marlowe in 1593.

*The Herbal Bed* (The Other Place, Stratford 1996).

*A Russian in the Woods* (The Other Place, Stratford 2001) draws on his experiences as a National Serviceman in Berlin in 1950.

Peter Whelan has also written plays for the Little Theatre Guild (*Shakespearean Country* 1992), New Vic, Newcastle-under-Lyme

(*Overture* 1997) and the Birmingham Rep (*Divine Right* 1996 and *Nativity* 1999). His latest play, *The Earthly Paradise*, was premiered at the Almeida in 2004 – art, love and friendship in the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

Within this huge range of historical settings, all the plays reveal, in some degree, how human relationships and the demands of the individual conscience are affected by specific social, religious and political conditions.

## The Facts

*It was the pain of the moral dilemma detectable behind this small handful of facts that drew me to write it.*

Peter Whelan

In 1583 Susanna Shakespeare, the first child of William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway, was born: she was said to be her father's favourite. The name Susanna was unusual in a town like Stratford and was suggestive of Puritanism. As the reformation swept England, it was becoming a growing custom to give children names with biblical origins. In 1607 Susanna married a successful physician, John Hall. He had studied at Queens' College, Cambridge, receiving a BA in 1593 and a MA in 1597. He was the only doctor in Stratford and set up his home and practice in Hall's Croft. A popular and conscientious doctor, he prepared notebooks of his case notes which were later published as *Select observations on English bodies, or cures both empiricall and historical performed upon very eminent persons in desperate diseases*. His devotion to medicine led him to twice refusing a seat on the town council, and on a third occasion he accepted only to incur a fine for missing the regular meetings. He also preferred a fine to accepting a knighthood. Susanna and John Hall had a daughter, Elizabeth, an only child. Five years later, when Susanna was thirty, she was publicly slandered by a young gentleman, John Lane, second son of the well-heeled family of Alveston Manor: he claimed that Susanna Hall *had the runinge of the reynes and had been naught with Rafe Smith at John Palmer*. Susanna

brought a charge of defamation against him in the diocesan court at Worcester Cathedral.

As for the other characters: we know that Rafe Smith was a haberdasher and hatter of Sheep street, Stratford, and probably a friend of the Halls; Vicar-General Goche is thought to have been a puritan; Bishop Parry was celebrated for his sermons at James's Court and was not a supporter of the puritan tendency.

## Susanna Hall's Tombstone

**Here lyeth ye body of Susanna  
Wife to John Hall, gent ye  
Daughter of William Shakespeare, gent:  
Shee deceased ye 11<sup>th</sup> of July  
1649, aged 66.**

Witty above her sexe, but that's not all,  
Wise to salvation was good Mistris Hall,  
Something of Shakespeare was in that, but this  
Wholly of him whom she's now in blisse.

Then passenger, hast here a teare  
To weepe with her that wept with all  
That wept yet set herself to chere  
Them up with comforts cordiall  
Her love shall live her mercy spread  
When thou hast ner'e a teare to shed.

## Some Themes

*The story is essentially about the contradiction between human desires and the social conventions which seek to repress them.*

Harvey Thompson, 1998

The play examines the role of lies: the small ones which keep marriages together and the big ones which are based on the denial of one's own feelings.

### **Love and marriage**

Should a man be loyal to his wife even though there is no love in the marriage? How should a passionate woman behave in a marriage based on respect, devotion even, but which lacks sexual passion?

### **Medicine**

Susanna studies Hall's books on medicine and occasionally, with his encouragement, makes up prescriptions for him; a highly unusual occupation for a woman in seventeenth century England. She uses her experience in this striking image: *Love changes us, love is Alchemy. In that furnace* (used by her husband for the preparation of prescriptions) *everything changes.*

### **Social Class**

Hall points out to Jack Lane that a good doctor must be *driven to cure* and feels that Lane has difficulty in dealing with the diseases of the lower orders – *hardly the job for the son of a gentleman.* The sons of the gentry often resented being driven to work by their families, which expressed itself in their drunken and riotous behaviour.

## Herbs and Medicine

Herbal cures were common in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Apothecaries were known to carry vast amounts of these 'magical' healing herbs. Some very common ones were comfrey, lavender, lettuce, periwinkle and saffron. Comfrey, or Saracen's root, was mixed together with various

juices (calamint, liquorice, enula, campana and hyssop) to form a substance to wash wounds. This substance was also used to set bones and cleanse the lungs. Lettuce was believed to cure insomnia and gonorrhoea. It was also said that lettuce could weaken eyesight, To prevent this apothecaries recommended mixing lettuce with celery to avoid the side effects. Saffron was a very important herb used to cure many ailments. The herb was supposed to cure stomach problems, strengthen the heart, cure smallpox and act as an antidote to poison. Different parts of the saffron plant had to be harvested at certain points of the year for ultimate potency. The leaves and flowers were good from Lady Day to Midsummer; the stalks and fruits were good between Midsummer and Michaelmas; the roots were good from Michaelmas to Lady Day.

Chris Laucius: Seventeenth Century Medicine.



Hall's Croft today

# About Proscenium

George Woollands and Margaret Rendle founded Proscenium in 1924.

The company's first production was the now little-known "The Tide" by Basil McDonald Hastings. Since then, the company has performed nearly 250 plays, using Harrow as a base, since 1945.

In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

For more information on Proscenium, please visit our web site :

<http://www.proscenium.org.uk>

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## Our Next Production

Habeus Corpus

By Alan Bennett

GP Arthur Wicksteed doesn't pay his wife - the big bosomed Muriel - enough attention. Instead, he pursues a young patient, who in turn pursues the doctor's son. Meanwhile his sister Connie is painfully aware of her flat chest and decides to do something about it . One complication leads to another and almost everyone behaves badly.

Directed by Rob Ewen  
Wednesday 8th to Saturday 11th June, 2005  
7.45pm Travellers Studio, Harrow Arts Centre