

PROSCENIUM

Playhouse Creatures

By April de Angelis

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Wednesday 14th to Saturday 17th January 2015
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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April de Angelis

Dramatis Personæ:

Doll Common	Mrs. Anne Gerrard
Nell Gwyn.....	Mrs. Clare Wooster
Elizabeth Farley.....	Mrs. Shirley Wootten
Rebecca Marshall.....	Mrs. Hannah Lester
Mary Betterton.....	Mrs. Linda Hampson
The King's Playhouse & The Duke's Playhouse.....	The Compass Theatre
Director.....	Mr. Jevan Morris
Assistant Director.....	Mrs. Shirley Wootten
Stage Manager	Mr. Richard Kessel
Crew and Noises Off.....	Members of Proscenium & “Big Ted” Esq.
Wardrobe.....	Mrs. Evelyn Moutrie & Members of Proscenium
Visual & Audio Design.....	Simon J. Raver Esq.
Lighting Design	Tom Peters Esq. (Compass Theatre)
Lighting Coordinator.....	Arnold Glickman Esq.
Props Coordinator	Mrs. Bazga Shabir
Prompt.....	Mrs. Caroline Bronne-Shanbury

Production Notes

The Action takes place on stage, backstage and in the environs of the King's Playhouse and later The Duke's Playhouse.

April De Angelis' script is set in 1669, but actual events from history and the actresses' lives indicate that the action spans a number of years from the early 1660s to the mid-1690s.

Specifically, it takes place during the Restoration. Theatres have just re-opened after 17 years of Puritanism suppression and, for the first time, women are (officially) allowed on the stage. As we follow a group of pioneering actresses in a working company, we see the struggles, compromises and stark realities they face in this exceedingly hard-hitting environment, which they bear variously with grace, bawdiness, calculated drive and an ultimate equanimity that this is a tough world for a woman.

Much of the action appears continuous, but often days or even months may have passed between scenes. Listen for auditory clues to the passage of time.

From the Director

Each character (with one exception) is named after an actual Restoration actress but I believe the roles are all composites of a number of actresses. The piece is neither intended to be biographical nor historically accurate but representative of the lives of many actresses of that period. The play spans several years and each actress goes through different stages in a kind of feminist Rake's Progress from gutter to stardom (or in some cases, vice versa).

Nell Gwyn, the best known and most notorious of this company, a barmaid who forced her way into the theatre and then parlayed that fame into becoming one of the King's most powerful mistresses.

Mrs. Farley (a preacher's daughter) aiming to catch the eye of a wealthy gentleman until a liaison leaves her compromised. She is probably based on an amalgam of Mrs. Elizabeth Weaver (née Farley) and Elizabeth Barry, another leading actress and

one of the original shareholders of Betterton's Company, who appeared in an earlier draft of April De Angelis' script.

Mrs. Marshall, determined to secure her independence as an actress, spearheaded a campaign to make women shareholders in the theatre and to have more female playwrights. Most likely a composite of sisters Anne and Rebecca Marshall, both of whom were prominent actresses of the period with the King's Company and later the rival Duke's Company under Thomas Betterton .

Mrs. Betterton, the matriarch of our troupe of actresses, was possibly the first ever actress on the English stage even before the Restoration, pretending to be a man in roles opposite her husband, the esteemed Actor-Manager Thomas Betterton, whose presence you may feel on occasion in the auditorium, although he does not appear in this all-female production.

Doll Common, watching over all as she sweeps and representative of the repressed generation before, is the only character not named after a real actress. Her name is not that of a real historical figure but of a character, played by actress Katherine Corey in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*. In Jonson's play, Doll Common is a prostitute with a great deal of sharp wit and native cleverness. The name has other resonances: Doll was a common name for a prostitute and 'Common' gives us the idea that the character is an Everyman figure.

In a way, Doll Common is the spirit of the Restoration theatre itself, raised out of the ashes of the time, pre-Cromwell and pre-Puritanism, when this playhouse was a bear pit. Doll (like her near namesake Dot Cotton) was probably always here and very likely still is.

Naturally my cast believe this is all about the actresses. Personally, as the Director, I know it is all about multifunctional props, sets and costumes, clocks, performing bears, comedy, tragedy and history of the magic of theatre. Traditionally all the players will make their final exits followed by a bear.

But I'll let Doll tell you all about that...

Please enjoy.

Jevan Morris

Historical Background

Eleanor "Nell" Gwyn (1650 –1687) was a long-time mistress of King Charles II. Called "pretty, witty Nell" by Samuel Pepys, she has been regarded as a living embodiment of the spirit of Restoration England and has come to be considered a folk heroine. She was the most famous Restoration actress and possessed a prodigious comic talent. Gwyn had two sons by King Charles. Mary Meggs, a former prostitute nicknamed "Orange Moll" and a friend of Nell's mother Madam Gwyn, had been granted the licence to "vend, utter and sell oranges, lemons, fruit, sweetmeats and all manner of fruiterers and confectioners wares," within the theatre. Orange Moll hired Nell and her older sister Rose as scantily clad "orange-girls", selling the small, sweet "china" oranges to the audience inside the theatre for sixpence each. The work exposed her to multiple aspects of theatre life and to London's higher society: this was after all "the King's playhouse", and Charles frequently attended performances. The orange-girls would also serve as messengers between the men in the audience and the actresses backstage; they received monetary tips for this role and certainly some of these messages would end in sexual assignations. The new theatres were the first in England to feature actresses; earlier, women's parts were played by boys or men. Gwyn joined the rank of actresses at Bridges Street when she was fourteen, less than a year after becoming an orange-girl.

Mrs. Elizabeth Weaver née Farley was one of the original actresses in the King's Company when it was formed in 1660, along with Anne and Rebecca Marshall and Nell Gwyn. She was usually called Mrs. Weaver in cast lists, but her maiden name was Farley, and she apparently never married James Weaver. Samuel Pepys hinted on 11th January 1668 that Elizabeth Farley was for a brief period after the Restoration a mistress of Charles II but by the end of the 1660-1661 theatrical season she was known as Mrs. Weaver. In 1662 she announced she was leaving the stage after it was discovered she was pregnant.

Elizabeth Barry was an English actress of the Restoration period. She worked in big, prestigious London theatre companies throughout her successful career: from 1675 in the Duke's Company, 1682 – 1695 in the monopoly United Company, and from 1695 onwards as a member of the actors' cooperative usually known as Betterton's Company, of which she was one of the original shareholders. Her stage

career began 15 years after the first-ever professional actresses had replaced Shakespeare's boy heroines on the London stage.

Anne Marshall, also **Mrs. Anne Quin**, was a leading English actress of the Restoration era, one of the first generation of women performers to appear on the public stage in England among the initial group of actresses employed by the King's Company. She has been nominated as possibly the "first English actress". Mrs. Marshall retired from the stage in 1668 but she resumed her career nine years later, this time with the rival Duke's Company under Thomas Betterton. Anne Marshall had a younger sister, Rebecca Marshall, who was also a noted actress in the same era. Their father was a clergyman. The sisters played together at least once.

Rebecca Marshall was a noted English actress of the Restoration era, another of the first generation of women performers on the public stage in Britain. The younger Marshall sister began acting with the King's Company around 1663. She remained with that troupe for her full career, except for a final year with the rival Duke's Company in 1677. Samuel Pepys repeatedly refers to both Marshall sisters in his Diary; he calls the younger "Beck Marshall." Rebecca had a reputation as a beauty, which apparently caused her difficulties: she twice petitioned King Charles II for protection from obstreperous men in her audience and she had a habit of feuding with Nell Gwyn.

Mary Saunderson, known as **Mary Saunderson Betterton** after her marriage to Thomas Betterton, was an actress and singer in England during the 1660s and 1690s. She is considered one of the first English actresses. Her most notable accomplishment was to be the first female actress to portray several of Shakespeare's woman characters on the professional stage.

Katherine Corey was an English actress of the Restoration era, yet another of the first wave of female performers on the public stage in Britain. Corey played with the King's Company and the United Company, and had one of the longest careers of any actress in her generation. She was popular in a variety of roles, but especially in old women parts: scolding wives, mothers, governesses, waiting women, and bawds. In his Diary, Samuel Pepys, who admired Corey's talents, calls her "Doll Common" after her part in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*.

Thomas Patrick Betterton, English actor, son of an under-cook to King Charles I, was the de facto manager and director of the Duke's Company, and from the merger

of London's two theatre companies in 1682, he continued to fulfill these functions in the new United Company.

The **Duke's Company** was one of the two theatre companies (the other being the King's Company) that were chartered by King Charles II at the start of the English Restoration, when the London theatres re-opened after their eighteen-year closure (1642–60) during the English Civil War and the Interregnum. The first permanent venue for the King's Company was Gibbon's Tennis Court. In 1663, responding to competition from the Duke's Company's more advanced theatre in Lisle's Tennis Court at Lincoln's Inn Fields, Thomas Killigrew built and opened the King's Playhouse in Bridges Street, today's Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. This burned down in 1672 and was rebuilt and reopened in 1674. Killigrew sold most of his interests in the company by the early 1670s and management was in his son Charles' hands after 1671. In 1682, the King's Company and the Duke's Company merged to become the so-called United Company, under the leadership of the Duke's Company's people. The Duke's Theatre at Dorset Gardens, on the riverfront, was London's most luxurious playhouse.

The Great Plague of London shut down the Bridges Street theatre, along with most of the city, from the summer of 1665 through the autumn of 1666. Gwyn and her mother spent some of this time in Oxford, following the King and his court. The King's Company is presumed to have mounted some private theatrical entertainments for the court during this time away from the virulent capital. Gwyn and the other ten "women comedians in His Majesty's Theatre" were issued the right (and the cloth) to wear the King's livery at the start of this exile, proclaiming them official servants of the King.

April de Angelis dedicated the first production of the play to Elizabeth Howe whose book, *The First English Actresses*, was one of her sources and inspirations for the play. *Playhouse Creatures* was first performed in 1993 by a feminist theatre company called *The Sphinx - Women's National Touring Theatre*. The company exists to promote new writing by women playwrights, which gives opportunities for women performers.

Death and the Maiden, by Ariel Dorfman

Set in an unnamed country that is, like the author's native Chile, emerging from a totalitarian dictatorship, the play explores the after-effects of repression on hearts and souls. Paulina Escobar's husband Gerardo is to head an investigation into past human rights abuses. A Dr. Miranda stops by at the Escobars' house to congratulate Gerardo. Paulina overhears them speaking and is convinced that Miranda supervised her prison torture sessions. This white knuckle thriller is a riveting intellectual and emotional tug of war.

Directed by Linda Hampson

11th to 14th March 2015

7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 01895 673 200

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week in Harrow for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Clare Wooster

Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk