

Playhouse Creatures

by April De Angelis



Resource Guide Compiled by Jessica Dart for CoHo Productions

About the Production

What does it take to be (or not to be) a woman in the theatre? *Playhouse Creatures* shamelessly reveals their historic struggle to survive and thrive on the London stage and behind the scenes. Daring to tread the boards in Restoration England (ca. 1669), Nell Gwynn and other leading ladies endured poverty, violence, harassment and social ostracism while under constant pressure to produce new and titillating entertainment. Their successes in the form of leading roles, trysts with the King and eventually shares in the company could – and do – disappear at any time.

If the “future is female”, what must we learn from “herstory”? Playwright April De Angelis offers poetic heroines who #resistandpersist, who challenge and inspire others to follow their radical lead. This co-production team and talented cast are all ambitious, creative women who understand today’s pressing demands on women in the arts – between freelancing, teaching, day-jobbing, seeking child-care or relying on others for financial stability in the creative pursuit of “this thing one gives one’s life blood for” to not only survive, but thrive.

Playhouse Creatures has enjoyed multiple productions throughout the U.K. and United States, and this will be the first in Portland. It premiered in October 1993 at the Haymarket Theatre in England produced by the Sphinx Theatre Company. A revised commission of the play was produced in 1997 at the Old Vic in London. CoHo’s production is directed by Alana Byington, and co-produced by Brenan Dwyer and McKenna Twedt, featuring Lorraine Bahr, Brenan Dwyer, Jacklyn Maddux, Dainichia Noreault, and McKenna Twedt.

About the Playwright

April De Angelis’s plays include *Jumpy* (Royal Court and West End), *Wild East* (Royal Court), *A Laughing Matter* (Out of Joint/NT/tour), *The Warwickshire Testimony* (RSC), *The Positive Hour* (Out of Joint/Hampstead/Old Vic; Sphinx), *Headstrong* (NT Shell Connections), *Playhouse Creatures* (Sphinx Theatre Company), *Hush* (Royal Court), *Soft Vengeance* (Graeae Theatre Company), *Amongst Friends* (Hampstead), *The Life and Times of Fanny Hill* (adapted from the James Cleland novel), *Ironmistress* (ReSisters Theatre Company) and *Wuthering Heights* (adapted from Emily Brontë’s novel for Birmingham Rep). Her work for BBC Radio includes *Visitants*, *The Outlander*, which won the Writers’ Guild Award 1992, and *Cash Cows* for the Woman’s Hour serial. For opera: *Flight* with composer Jonathan Dove (Glyndebourne), and the libretto for *Silent Twins* (Almeida).



The Restoration (1660-1688)

The Restoration period marked the return of Charles II (at right) as the English monarch following Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth. Under Cromwell's Puritan rule (also known as the Interregnum, or the period between reigns), theatres were closed, performance and spectatorship were outlawed, speech was regulated, excessive holiday celebrations were suppressed, printing and distribution of non-government approved books and documents was prohibited, "monuments of superstition and idolatry" were demolished, and conservatism reigned.

When Charles II was restored to the throne, he brought along his flamboyant personal tastes, influenced by the time he spent exiled in France. His liberalism was the perfect antidote to the bleak, austere, and highly regulated Commonwealth. He did away with oppressive laws and reopened the theatres, this time allowing women to appear onstage legally.



Restoration Theatre

Prior to the closing of theatres during the Interregnum, it was illegal for women to appear onstage. Women's roles were played by young men or boys in drag, as it was considered indecent and inappropriate for "real" women to present themselves in such a public way. Once Charles II was restored to the throne, women were no longer prohibited from appearing on the public stage. The first woman appeared onstage (legally) on December 8, 1660 as Desdemona in *Othello*. There is some dispute as to which actress this was, though the role and the date are certain. Soon after the law changed, the demand for actresses outstripped the supply. Young men such as Edward Kynaston (left) continued to play female roles as they had done prior to the Interregnum. But as the public grew accustomed to seeing "real" women onstage and more women became actresses, the need for and acceptance of men in female roles waned.



Though having women onstage became the norm, it was thought that no "respectable" women pursued acting careers. It was assumed that women who displayed themselves on the public stage were whores with questionable morals. According to Elizabeth Howe's *The First English Actresses*, "The assumption that the word 'actress' stood for 'prostitute' rapidly became a self-fulfilling prophecy. An unprotected woman would have found it impossible to avoid sexual advances if she worked in the theatres. Men were free to go behind the scenes and watch the actresses dressing." Charles II issued an order to prevent non-company members from entering the backstage area as a protective measure for the actresses, but this rule was largely ignored by men who felt they were entitled to access.

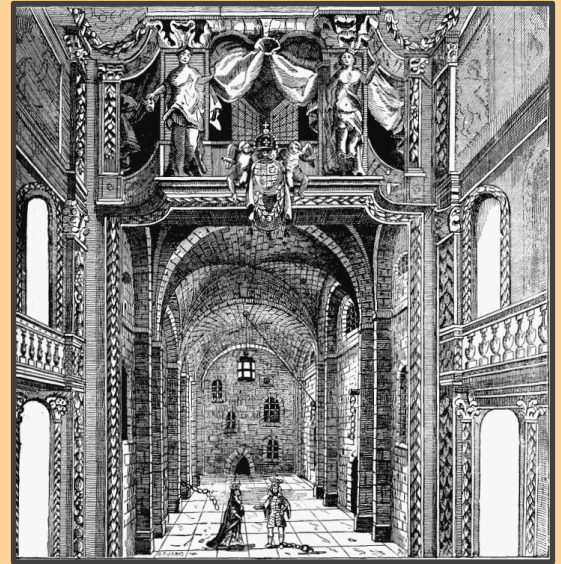
Most actresses adopted stage names consisting of "Mrs." and a surname, even if they weren't married. The "Mrs." title implied moral propriety and created a somewhat credible barrier to unwanted male attention. However, most actresses were conflated with the roles they played onstage - object of desire, rape victim, lusty wench, etc. - so the perception of actress as whore continued. It didn't help that actresses were often expected to play "breeches roles," wherein they wore men's clothing that exposed their usually-covered legs, much to the pleasure of the largely male audience.

The acting style associated with Restoration theatre developed from a combination of Elizabethan/Shakespearean style (standard in England before the theatres were closed) and French theatre of the 17th century. The older generation of actors who worked onstage before the Interregnum were the authorities when it came to training the newer, younger generation. Charles II's preference for all things French (architecture, literature, music, theatrical style, fashion) caused prominent theatre managers like Thomas Betterton to study and incorporate French theatrical traditions. In the simplest of terms, actors were taught that every emotion (humor or passion) was tied to the body in some way - a gesture, an

eye shift, a nostril flare, pronunciation, tears, sighs, hand wringing, etc. Negative emotions were expressed with the left hand, positive with the right.

From [Rehearsal From Shakespeare to Sheridan](#) by Tiffany Stern:

Pronunciation and gesture were broadly standardized, though comedy and tragedy seem to have used different levels of convention...tragedy seems to have demanded a more clearly stylized mode of behavior...Action and pronunciation were still valued separately, though actors were only judged “good” if they had equal skill in both...Though it is difficult to determine quite what theatrical speech was like, particular ways of speaking give something of a clue - there was “rant” (angry pronunciation), “cant” (whining or loving pronunciation), and “tone” (cadenced, musical pronunciation used for making declamations)...these are parodied in comedies and adhered to in tragedies...Instruction was imitative in its nature, and many established actors claimed to have based their best performances on patterns laid down by other actors - generally the actors who had first “instructed” them.



Theatre interior, ca. 1670

Male actors who originated roles continued to “own” and play them throughout their careers, even when they had grown old. On the other hand, female actresses usually didn’t own their roles, which allowed them to be replaced by younger women,

Because most theatres were destroyed during the Interregnum, Restoration playing spaces were created in [abandoned tennis courts](#) or former [bear pits](#), with more elaborate venues built later. The open air theatres ([such as The Globe](#)) of the Elizabethan era were no more. The new era demanded [lavish buildings containing proscenium playing spaces and elaborate sets lit by candle](#). [There were four major Restoration theatres in London](#). The main theatre shown in *Playhouse Creatures* is a version of the [Drury Lane Theatre](#). In the 17th and 18th centuries, it burned down several times and was rebuilt each time in the same approximate location. [Drury Lane is still in operation in London today](#).

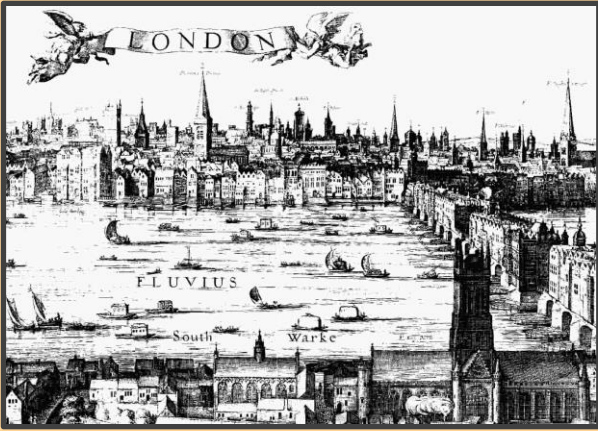


The “playing season” in public theatres lasted from September or October through June, with theatres open six days a week. Theatres would close for one week before Easter, each Friday during Lent, if a member of the royal family died, or as a precaution against the plague. Within a single season about 50 plays would be performed, with approximately 10 of them being new works.

Women playwrights became more prominent during the Restoration. [Aphra Behn](#) (left), the first woman writer recognized in English history, is known for her farcical style, bawdy content, and feminist tone. Mrs. Behn created roles for actresses she admired, including the role of Angelica Bianca in *The Rover* for Nell Gwynn. Mrs. Behn served as a spy for Charles II in Antwerp before becoming a playwright. She was awesome.

Life in 17th Century London

London wasn’t a clean place. Between 1348 and 1666 there were nearly 40 outbreaks of the plague which could have been prevented with more thorough sanitation (like maybe not dumping trash and human waste in the streets). The last large outbreak occurred in 1665 (The Great Plague). Within seven months, 100,000 Londoners (20% of the population) died. The economy suffered as people fled the city or were barricaded in at home to avoid contamination. The Great Fire of 1666 almost completely wiped out the plague, but it also destroyed most of the city. However, once the plague was eradicated, London was quickly rebuilt and those who had fled the city returned in droves, bringing new residents with them.



A map of London ca. 1666, prior to the Great Fire

The hysteria surrounding witchcraft that reached its peak in the mid-17th century died down during the Restoration, so “unconventional” women were far less likely to be accused of associating with the occult. However, in 1670 (the year in which *Playhouse Creatures* is set) a woman suspected of being a witch would still have been in danger of severe punishment or execution. The last woman found guilty of practicing witchcraft in England was executed in 1682.

Samuel Pepys, a young civil servant, kept a detailed diary for nearly a decade. His writings paint a vivid picture of London during the Restoration, including extensive information about the theatre. The full text of his diaries is available [here](#).

The Playhouse Creatures

While based in fact, the women represented in the play have been fictionalized or represent a composite of several different women. We get a glimpse of the women both backstage and onstage, helping us to understand both their public and private personas. Time has also been compressed, allowing DeAngelis to create a fictional 1669-1670 based on more than two decades of history.

Nell Gwynn

Born in 1650, Nell Gwynn (right) made her first appearance on the stage at about age 16 and became one of the most famous actresses of the Restoration. She was a favored mistress of Charles II and eventually had two children with him. She was the “least greedy” of his mistresses, and Charles made sure that Nell was provided for throughout her life. Nell began as an “orange girl” selling citrus outside of the Drury Lane Theatre. This was a common occupation for lower-class, foul-mouthed women of the era who may also have served as prostitutes. After becoming an actress, she was known as “pretty, witty Nell” for her comic abilities, and her skill in employing quick, sharp responses to hecklers. Nell is often represented in paintings with one breast bared and her arm draped over a lamb, allowing her to be at once erotic and innocent.



Mrs. Betterton

Mary Saunderson (left) married actor Thomas Betterton in 1662, and the couple appeared onstage together frequently. She was best known for her performance as Ophelia opposite Mr. Betterton’s Hamlet, and for her brilliant portrayal of Lady Macbeth. Her specialty was tragedy and playing pure heroines, and according to *The First English Actresses*, she “never spoke a suggestive prologue in her life, yet on occasion she did play a lustful villainess.” Pepys refers to her affectionately as “lanthe” in his diaries. The Bettertons had no children of their own, but often fostered and trained promising young actresses in their home. Mary was instrumental in teaching them proper technique and stage presence even after retiring from the stage.



Mrs. Marshall

Rebecca Marshall’s significant talent is mentioned several times in Pepys’ diaries. She took on formidable roles to much acclaim throughout her career, and she was one of the first actresses to leave for the Duke’s Company when the King’s Company began to have financial difficulties. Mrs. Marshall often found herself vulnerable to the cruelty of men who felt entitled to her body due to her actress status. She once claimed the King would protect her from Sir Hugh Middleton, but in retaliation Middleton employed a “Ruffian” to attack her on her way home from the theatre. On another occasion, she sought protection against a man who violently assaulted her in a coach and chased her with a sword. In the play she is in a tumultuous relationship with the Earl of Oxford (See Earl of Oxford entry below).

Mrs. Farley

Elizabeth Farley began her career as Mrs. Farley, but later married and changed her name to Mrs. Weaver. Although, some evidence suggests that she never actually married Mr. Weaver, just used his name. Scandal ensued when she became pregnant and word spread that their union wasn't legal. As suggested in the play, Mrs. Farley was possibly an early mistress of Charles II, ca. 1661. Sadly, information about Mrs. Farley seems to center on the men with whom she associated as opposed to her own accomplishments and personality.

Doll Common

Mrs. Katherine Corey was among the first actresses on the Restoration stage, and the very first actress contracted by Killigrew for the King's Company. Mrs. Corey was known for being "large and plain," allowing her to play many character roles. Samuel Pepys dubbed Mrs. Corey "Doll Common" after seeing her in that role in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, and refers to her as such throughout his diaries. Doll's character in *Playhouse Creatures* is not based directly on Mrs. Corey's life/experience, but rather on the meaning of the name itself: Doll (short for Dorothy), and Common (implying commonness, simplicity, and perhaps looseness of morals).

The Men

Though there are no male characters physically present in the play, men influence, control, and complicate every facet of the women's lives.



King Charles II (left) was known for his dark curly hair, handsome face, and sexual appetite. Charles had many mistresses (several actresses among them). His relationship with Nell Gwynn resulted in two children and established Nell as a kind of rags-to-riches folk heroine. From *The Gay King: Charles II, His Court and Times* by Dorothy Senior:
The man was a mass of contradictions. He was called the Merry Monarch and had the saddest face in the kingdom. He squandered thousands on his mistresses, yet grudged losing five pounds at tennis. He told Burnet that he looked upon falsehood and cruelty as the greatest crimes in God's sight, and to his sister the Duchess of Orleans he wrote, "I am one of those Bigotts who thinke that malice is a much greater sinn than a poor frailty of nature." Strange words these from one who sold his country to obtain pocket money and who had a man's nose split to the bone as a reward for his too plain speaking.

Thomas Betterton (right) was a prominent and talented actor/manager during the Restoration. He married Mary Saunderson (Mrs. Betterton) in 1662, and appeared onstage with her often. He is/was considered by many to be the greatest actor of all time, and a champion of women on the stage. Betterton is buried in Westminster Abbey. Strangely, Betterton's average looks did not stop him from playing young, dashing, and heroic roles throughout his career.



The Earl of Oxford (left) is mentioned as the man who torments Mrs. Marshall. This story is based on Aubrey de Vere's (the Earl of Oxford) deception of actress Hester Davenport. The Earl fell in love with Mrs. Davenport while she was playing the role of Roxalana in *The Siege of Rhodes*, and attempted to woo her by sending gifts and messages to the playhouse. Mrs. Davenport refused his advances and returned his presents. Finally de Vere promised to marry her, and Mrs. Davenport accepted. See the play to find out what happened next!



Artistic Note

by CoHo Artistic Fellow Jessica Dart



Representation matters. It matters in the workplace, in government, in the accurate recording of history, and in the arts. Women tirelessly fight for representation in each of these realms because they know that subverting centuries of patriarchy can't be done delicately and won't be done quickly. Playhouse Creatures co-producers Brenan Dwyer and McKenna Twedt view this play as a call for continued action, noting, "Today, (women) still fight for good roles, authentic stories, and representative leadership (in the arts)...we believe it is essential to be vocal about the accomplishments and setbacks of women, to discuss privilege and advantage as part of our artistic exploration, and to remember that this play honors the women who came before us." Those women were the first Restoration actresses in 17th century England.

The Restoration period began in 1660 with King Charles II's return to the English throne, following decades of Puritan rule under Oliver Cromwell. This new era brought radical change for a country that had been stifled by austerity. Charles II reinstated recreational and entertainment activities that Cromwell outlawed, including sport, dancing, and holiday celebrations. He reopened London's theatres, which had been closed down and destroyed under Cromwell, radically decreeing that women were permitted to appear onstage.

Prior to the theatre ban, only men were legally permitted to appear onstage. Women's roles were played by young men or boys in drag, as it was considered indecent for "real" women to present themselves in such a public manner. Female roles were essential to successful storytelling, but women were not. Men could write the plays and represent the physical feminine ideal onstage without compromising their morals, women could not.

With Charles II's decree, women began to pursue professional careers on the public stage. One step forward. Any woman who became an actress was considered a whore, and men were allowed to enter the dressing room at any time to watch the actresses change. Two steps back. Audiences loved seeing women onstage, and playwrights began to create roles specifically for popular actresses like Nell Gwynn. One step forward. Plays often included scenes of sexual violence against women ("despoilment") to titillate the largely male audiences, and actresses who wanted to make a living had no choice but to play them. Two steps back. Women were paid less than men (that still happens today, by the way). One step back. Many actresses gained social standing and financial security by becoming mistresses to wealthy men, members of the court, or even King Charles himself. Stand still.

The need for equal representation continues today, as most playwrights, artistic directors, and the highest paid performers are men. Women continue to combat the notion that their work is worth less, their input less valuable, and that their bodies are not their own. The actresses represented in Playhouse Creatures boldly demonstrate the ongoing struggle to fight misogyny and find self-worth in art regardless of the obstacles. They are more than mere creatures. They are laying the foundation for the future.

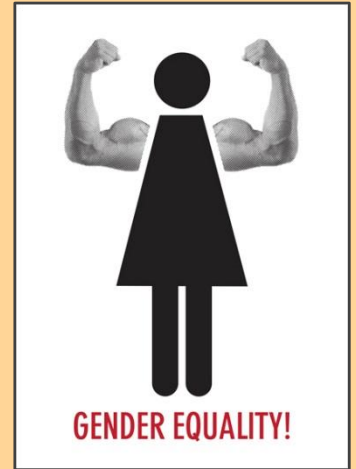
"That men of quality should take up with and spend themselves and fortunes in keeping little playhouse creatures for!"

-Mrs. Squeamish in *The Country Wife* by William Wycherley, 1675

Further Reading

Gender Inequity in the Arts

- * A quick google image search for “feminism meme” produces [disturbing results](#). The majority of the images are anti-feminism, anti-woman, insulting, and cruel. If this is what google tells women, what is the rest of the world saying?
- * **The Institute for Women’s Policy Research** has information about [wage disparity across workforce sectors](#), and the ways in which it affects women of color in particular.
- * [Age & Gender Equity in the Arts](#) is doing great things to correct inequities in the Portland arts community and beyond.
- * The wage gap in Hollywood is huge! More information can be found [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). (Admittedly, most women never come close to making this much money in their lives. But the inequity is glaring!)
- * At the age of 28, [Elizabeth Banks was told she was too old](#) to play 27-year-old Tobey Maguire’s girlfriend in Spiderman. The role went to 18-year-old Kirsten Dunst.
- * [American Theatre](#) has published a number of fascinating articles about the journey toward gender equity in the theatre.



The Restoration Period and Restoration Theatre

- * [*Women, Theatre and Performance : Treading the bawds \(Actresses and playwrights on the Late Stuart Stage\)*](#) by Gilli Bush-Bailey
- * [*Of Love and War: The Political Voice in the Early Plays of Aphra Behn*](#) by Judy A. Hayden
- * [*The Weaker Vessel: Women’s Lot in Seventeenth Century England*](#) by Antonia Fraser
- * [*King Charles II*](#) by Antonia Fraser

