



'Or,' a witty romp in Lenox

By Steve Barnes Updated 9:08 pm, Saturday, July 30, 2016



Tod Randolph plays the first English female playwright in "Or," at Shakespeare & Company. (S&C publicity photo by Ava G. Lindenmaier)

Rich with pleasures theatrical, linguistic, philosophical and comedic, Liz **Duffy Adams'** play "Or," at **Shakespeare & Company** is a witty romp inspired by the life of **Aphra Behn**, who in the 1660s became the first female playwright in **English theater**. (The play's title pointedly includes a comma,

an affection that's the worst thing about the show.)

A former spy for the crown, Behn, played with intelligence and sensuality by 19-year company veteran Tod Randolph, has returned to London from years abroad. Because she hasn't been paid for her government work, we find her in debtor's prison at the start of the play, but her back bills are soon relieved by a masked lover, who is revealed to be none other than the king himself, **Charles II** (Allyn Burrows).

Freed to write and ensconced in comfortable quarters in the next scene, Behn spends the rest of the play working to finish her own play over one long night as her toils and emotions are interrupted by a succession of visitors. Though based on real people, including the stage queen Nell Gwynne (Nehassaiu deGannes), Adams' play takes liberties with the known record and explores in imaginative flights what isn't known.

In the years after the monarchy was restored following a repressive period under the Puritans, freedom, possibility and a profound sense of liberal change informed life in London, much as it would during the 1960s. In Adams' version, at least, sexuality was open, fluid; Behn, Gwynne and even Charles II embrace bisexuality and a Restoration version of free love, where pleasure is positive and jealousy and possessiveness have no place. The women kiss and profess love, but Behn isn't bothered when the king and Gwynne head into the bedroom for a session of their own. She's got pressing problems, notably the arrival of former lover William Scot (Burrows again), who brings news of an assassination plot against the king, and a visit by an imperious theater impresario (deGannes, delivering a guffaw-worthy monologue while wearing a gorgeously ridiculous dress from the production's costume designer, **Govane Lohbauer**). And Behn still has that play to finish.

Director **Alice Reagan** bring a choreographer's eye to moving the action throughout the in-the-round staging, and she gets great fun from the farcical convention of well-timed entrances and exits, including Burrows hiding in a center-stage trunk as Scot and appearing from offstage moments later as the king. The actors clearly relish Adams' clever, often headily eloquent lines, some rhyming. Pitching woo with well-wrought verse is a special kind of seduction, for characters and audiences.