

The Boston Globe

STAGE REVIEW

She's got a play to write, but the plot keeps thickening in 'Or,'



AVA G. LINDENMAIER

Tod Randolph portrays pioneering British dramatist Aphra Behn in "Or,".

By Don Aucoin GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 01, 2016

LENOX — Even granting that productivity-sapping distractions are an occupational hazard for any writer, Aphra Behn certainly has her hands full in "Or," a clever and beguiling comedy by Liz Duffy Adams at Shakespeare & Company.

How can Behn possibly complete her new play when one lover after another — King Charles II, the actress Nell Gwynne (as it's spelled here), and the spy William Scot — keeps bursting into her London parlor one tumultuous night in the late 1660s, making demands on her attention and her allegiance, insistently trying to draw her into their schemes, intrigues, or ambitions?

It's a complex juggling act for Behn, the pioneering British dramatist, and the actress who portrays her, Tod Randolph, has to juggle a few things as well. She does so with consummate skill, conveying Behn's drive, the fervor of her literary aspirations, her freewheeling sensuality, and her ineradicable desire for independence — strikingly at odds with the norms of her era — while making clear it was at the core of Behn's being.

To underscore how contemporary Behn seems to us, Adams's play presents a deliberately anachronistic blend of Restoration style and present-day vernacular that sometimes falls jarringly on the ear, as when Nell tells Behn she's going to be “the next big thing” or remarks “Good weed” while puffing on a pipe. But that matters less than the consistently witty writing, vivid performances by a cast of three, and nimbly staged sequences on display here. Director Alice Reagan keeps things moving for the most part, though the time required for scene and costume changes does this production's pacing no favors.

Adams has built her fictionalized play around a singularly remarkable figure. The first British woman to work as a professional playwright, Behn (1640-89) created at least 17 plays, mainly comedies, during the Restoration era, including her best-known work, “The Rover,” and “The Emperor of the Moon,” which Shakespeare & Company is currently staging at its Rose Footprint Theatre. Behn also wrote poetry and fiction, including the novel “Oroonoko,” based on her experience living in Surinam. The Guardian's Belinda Webb once described Behn as “the Restoration's very own combination of Dorothy Parker and Mae West.” Virginia Woolf famously

asserted: “All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn . . . for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.”

In her mid-20s, it is believed, Behn was employed by Charles II as a spy in the Second Anglo-Dutch War. In “Or,” Adams clearly wants us to think about the parallels between theater and espionage: All those plots! All that play-acting!

When Behn got back to London, she was flat-broke and was eventually imprisoned for debt. That is where we meet her in “Or, ”: pacing behind the bars of a private jail cell (set design is by Sandra Goldmark). Even there, Randolph’s Behn projects a certain breezy confidence and indomitability. “I will be a playwright,” she tells Charles.

Once freed from prison and ensconced in a rented parlor, complete with writing desk and inkpot, she sets out to make that dream a reality. But Behn must cope with the aforementioned distractions. In particular, she must find a way to conceal William Scot from King Charles II. William is a comrade and lover of Behn’s from her spying days who shows up unexpectedly, and might be part of a conspiracy to kill the king.

Both the silky Charles and the rough-edged William are played by Allyn Burrows, whose versatility and verve are well known to audiences in Boston, where he performs with Actors’ Shakespeare Project (and also serves as that troupe’s artistic director). Burrows gets quite a workout in “Or, ”: One moment, as William, he’s locked in an onstage trunk; the next time we see him, it is as the bewigged Charles.

Nehassaiu deGannes excels in three roles: the flirtatious Nell; a curmudgeonly servant named Maria, whom you really don’t want to cross; and, best of all, Lady Davenant, an aristocrat who veers into a diatribe that slyly explains why this play is called “Or, ”. Ordering Behn not to give her play a title with a fussy “or” in it (a la Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night, or What You Will”), Lady Davenant declares: “I don’t care if the great man did it, they take up half the poster, and the typesetter charges by the word. Make up your mind and pick one, thank you.”

OR,

Play by Liz Duffy Adams. Directed by Alice Reagan. Presented by Shakespeare & Company. At Tina Packer Playhouse, Lenox, through Sept. 4. Tickets: \$10-\$80, 413-637-3353, www.shakespeare.org
Don Aucoin can be reached at aucoin@globe.com.