



Sightlines

by Charles McNulty

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n the commute from one age to another, humor sometimes misses its connection. Take the report of Kafka's Prague coterie bursting into hysterics while hearing excerpts from *The Metamorphosis*. As irony-laden as the story may be, Gregor Samsa's pathetic transformation doesn't tickle us so much today—one can only speculate that Franz's inner circle was responding to some inside joke about cockroaches. Of course certain situations remain eternally amusing, but a fusty dramatic style can belabor a good gag into the ground. The question is, do you play old comedy as written, or do you try to update it to modern taste?

The London Cuckolds: Restoration Benny Hill
(photo: Owen Thompson)

Edward Ravenscroft's exceptionally naughty Restoration comedy *The London Cuckolds* (Blue Heron), a work that achieved great popularity in the 17th century before being tsk-tsked out of the English repertory for the next 200 years. While the play's absence was no great loss for dramatic literature, this commedia dell'arte-inspired farce deploys a gleeful ensemble of stock characters (lunkheaded husbands, randy wives, wily servants) in sketches that are one part sexual satire, two parts slapstick.

John Byrne's faithful 1985 adaptation attempts to smooth out the unwieldy plot, yet the repetitive nature of the ribald shenanigans calls for more judicious cutting. Director Owen Thompson's cast seems to have taken a common vow of shamelessness, which pays decent comic dividends for the cuckolded leads. But by converting the adulterous wives into harmlessly horny cartoons, the production packs little subversive punch. Imagine the cast of *Sex and the City* guest-starring on *The Benny Hill Show*. Sure, there's plenty of vulgar fun, but without any real moral danger the entire affair amounts to a long and increasingly tedious smut joke.

The Queen's Company's all-female version of Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (Currican) employs the old strategy of cross-gender casting in their lively, if overly winking, approach to the Restoration playwright whom Virginia Woolf deemed the mother of all modern women writers. The production, directed by Rebecca Patterson, includes more fey crotch-grabbing than a Michael Jackson video. But the goatee-donning ensemble can't quite get beyond the novelty of the drag conceit. This kind of gender-bending has become rather familiar, and two and a half hours of Behn require more than ballsy posturing.



The convoluted tale of masked women navigating the shoals of their future (convent, prostitution, or marriage), while rakish men vie clumsily for their maidenheads, never rises beyond the level of mugging parody. Perhaps a more liberated textual adaptation, like the production's amusingly updated prologue, would have better served Patterson's playfully anachronistic drag act. In any case, the shortcomings of this elbow-nudging version of *The Rover* remind that an actor in nuanced command of her craft is always more radical than any "queer" directorial concept.

Dawn Powell has been "rediscovered" so many times that nearly every age tries to claim her as a contemporary. But this Greenwich Village wisecracker belongs to the Hemingway era that started tying one on during Prohibition and kept debauching into the 1950s. Powell actually set out to be a playwright, though her lack of success quickly convinced her to become a novelist. First produced in 1934, *Jig Saw* is one of her early "failed" plays—a satiric stab at New York life with French farcical overtones. Like most of her writing, it's the stinging wit of her unflinching observations that rescues the work from its formal clunkiness.

Appropriately performed at the Bank Street Theatre, in the heart of the author's old stomping grounds, the Peccadillo Theater Company's handsome production captures the drunken style of the period. Set designer Michael Allen's swanky penthouse sumptuously re-creates an Upper East Side abode, where mother and daughter feud over the same handsome flounderer. Powell's decidedly un-p.c. punch lines can still provoke apoplectic laughter, yet something is off in this cast's timing—the actors haven't settled into the dialogue as comfortably as they have Linda Ross's silky loungewear. Director Dan Wackerman has all the elements for a first-rate revival. Perhaps his production simply needs to marinate in some period gin.

While not comedies, two other recent theater offerings provided sui generis delight. Chelsea Bacon's *Breaker: An Aerial Fairy Tale* (Dixon Place) conjures a dreamland of trapeze artistry, live blues music, and a surreal fable about a lost magical fishing village that fell into the sea. A glittery, small-scale circus for kids, the production contains hypnotic depth for childless adults as well. Though the sketchy story could use further development, the groovy orchestra, featuring the lush vocals of Rachelle Garniez, lulls the imagination into accepting a world of balletic sea monsters and rope-climbing urchins who sleep suspended by their agile toes.

Teatro delle Albe's *L'Isola di Alcina* (presented last week at the Kitchen) is an exquisitely staged dramatic poem by Nevio Spadoni about two sisters, one aptly named after Ariosto's sorceress in *Orlando Furioso*, the other a mute casualty of a failed romance. Performed as a spoken avant-garde opera, the piece unfortunately offered no simultaneous translation of its hermetic Romagnolo dialect, which severely limited most native Italian speakers' access to the material, never mind someone with just a few language courses and a Sicilian grandmother to his credit. But the ravishing mise-en-scène (particularly Luigi Ceccarelli's cornet soundscape and Vincent Longuemare's palette of amber lights) fulfills theater's ultimate ambition—holding an audience entranced in a visceral present.

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