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## The Feigned Courtesans

By *Gwen Orel*



How wonderful to discover via New York Classical Theatre that the spirit of Joe Papp lives on... it's refreshing to discover a theatre company truly providing free theatre for the people this summer—and doing it with style and charm. Papp's original ideals were all about providing excellent classical theatre free of charge for New Yorkers (celebrity roles and law firm seats grew out of a later need to raise money).

New York Classical Theatre is not just doing classical theatre in the park, it is filling in a gap left by the lamented En Garde Arts: providing New Yorkers with true site-specific work. What this means in practice is that you need to wear your running shoes to see their production of *The Feigned Courtesans*, because you literally follow the action from place to place in Central Park. And the park steps up to its role, providing weeping willows, gentle ponds and rolling hills as if it had been studying a Watteau painting for tips.

The play is by Aphra Behn, that dashing Restoration playwright who became a darling of the academic set about fifteen years ago when "expanding the canon" was the talk of the town. Her life was even more interesting than her plays, which were popular hits in her day; she was a spy for Charles II in Antwerp and later spent some time in prison for debt (debt incurred serving the crown; she didn't stay long). It was only after those defining events that she became a successful playwright (an encouraging thought for aspiring writers and actors!). Women on stage were an

innovation that Charles II brought home with him from France, and though Behn herself was not an actress, her plays provided wonderful roles for actresses and gave the audience a chance to see comely women both in skirts and in breech roles.

*The Feigned Courtesans* is no exception. Like many of her plays, this one uses the idea of arranged marriage as a jumping-off place, and has the female characters drive the plot. Here you have a complex plot involving not one but three young ladies, fiancés, secret loves, uncles, guardians and the identity of a courtesan. It's far more confusing to describe than to watch! Two sisters, Marcella (Marnye Young) and Cornelia (Liz Beckham), run away: Marcella to escape an arranged marriage, Cornelia to meet up with her love. For reasons best known to a Restoration audience, the two girls decide to escape discovery by posing as famous courtesans. Meanwhile, Laura Lucretia (Deborah Keller), who is in love with Galliard (Joshua Decker), the best friend of Cornelia's beloved, Fillamour (Shad Ramsey), has also run away and has chosen the identity of one of the same famous courtesans as a disguise. Oh, and Laura is the sister of the man assigned to Marcella, Octavio (Michael Balsey).

Apparently, "Silvianetta" as a presumed identity was all the rage for Englishwomen frolicking in seventeenth-century Italy. The real Silvianetta never does show up, fortunately for all concerned. While Marcella and Cornelia are posing and waiting, their brother Julio (John Patrick) arrives. Julio is engaged to marry Laura Lucretia, but neither have met each other.

This is all far more confusing to describe than to watch. Think of it as a seventeenth-century "Friends." In addition the play has some hilarious clown figures: Mr. Tickletext (Matt Walker), a pompous but romantic tutor, and his pupil, Sir Signal Buffoon (David Ian Lee), who is, as his name declares, singularly idiotic. Lee creates an impressively stupid fop with balletic and bizarre body language and puppy-like eagerness.

Director Stephen Burdman keeps everything moving swiftly and charmingly. Who is betrothed to whom and who sighs for whom are clear and funny. The park tableaux are perfectly chosen, thanks in part to Production Designer Jessica Gaffney. The show moves its audience around with the sun and seamlessly works up to a brilliant fight scene in the dark, where mistaken identity melds perfectly with slapstick, thanks to Fight Choreographer Jen Nelson. As it grew darker, production staff helped the show along with "footlights" —flashlights held on the actors' faces. With the park lamps slowly coming on, it added a poetic touch to the look of the whole piece.

This is a romantic comedy-farce, so the right couples end up together and nobody is heartbroken for very long. Decker's comic outrage at discovering Beckham is no courtesan but a proper young lady is the outrage of "I'm not the marrying kind" men everywhere, and it is utterly charming, as is his willing defeat at Beckham's hands. All of the cast are convincing, confident and appealing. *The Feigned Courtesans* is an unexpected treat, carried out with panache, style and a high sense of fun.

*The Feigned Courtesans* runs through August 29<sup>th</sup>, Thursday through Sunday at 7:00 PM, in Central Park Meet at West 103rd Street and Central Park West Subway: B or C to 103rd Street, Bus: M10 Free to the Public; no reservations required (212) 252-4531 <http://www.newyorkclassical.org>