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# "Playhouse creatures:" A study of restoration actresses

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“Playhouse Creatures:” A Study of Restoration Actresses

An Honors Capstone Thesis  
By Emily LaPlante

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## Abstract

Creatures. Women. Actresses. We are here because of women like Mary Betterton, Doll Common, Nell Gwyn, Elizabeth Farley, and Rebecca Marshall. Theatre is about telling stories. Their story is a timeless one: of suffering, resilience, dedication, love, and comradeship. Actresses were first permitted by royal decree to act upon the stage in 1669 by King Charles II of England. This decree created a spark within the playhouses to see actresses in the flesh perform. With this came a ripple effect of a host of expectations and suppression. This Honors Capstone is a comprehensive look into the themes of April De Angelis's *Playhouse Creatures*, the historical context of these themes, as well as their application to the process of directing the play itself.

## Preface

This Honors Capstone consists of a creative project in two parts: a thesis and a production. The thesis, which I began writing in the Fall of 2018, incorporates research on the themes of *Playhouse Creatures*, text analysis, and the application of this research and analysis on the production. The production, which I directed and self-produced with help in the form of a grant from the Honors College, took place over four months in the Spring of 2019— beginning in January with the directorial prep work for auditions, callbacks, scene work, and overall concept, and ending in April with three performances of the play in various locations on JMU’s campus.

Having already done the majority of the research for the production through my thesis in the fall, the integration of this research came when looking at the text in preparation for putting the show on its feet. I sat down with my giant pile of library books on Restoration theatre, feminism and performance, the male gaze, and of course, the play. The question I asked myself was: What do I, as the director of this piece, want the audience to walk away with? The answer I found actually ended up being another question: Has the experience of women in theatre today changed?

The humorous part about this is that the play, in effect, does not answer this question. Rather, it brings up a series of questions about what it means to be a woman and a performer. Through the exploration of the lives of five Restoration actresses, we find experiences that we relate to, and some we do not. To me, the play shows the audience the inevitable falling apart of these five women and begs the consideration of what their sacrifices accomplished. The goal that my design team, actors, and I all wished to accomplish was relating our contemporary experience

as theatre-makers with that of these women. This brought up themes such as the male gaze, feminism, sexualization, celebrity, and more. There were many discussions had in the design meetings and rehearsal room surrounding the overarching themes of *Playhouse Creatures* and how they impact us today. And, more often than not, there were questions, questions, and more questions.

## Introduction

Three years ago, I typed “feminist plays” into my search bar, just looking for new things to read. I never imagined this action would lead me to the greatest discovery of my artistic career thus far. April De Angelis’s *Playhouse Creatures* immediately caught my eye in the midst of a long list of titles. I was always particularly drawn to Restoration Actresses as a subject in my theatre history courses because they were some of the first professional female performers. The idea of exploring the origins of female performance captivated me as an artist. From being cast in *The Vagina Monologues* my sophomore year, to *The Women* junior year, to *The Wolves* this year, all-female plays have been the center of my college career. Looking back at all of those wonderful shows, I thought to myself, what better way to end my college experience than with directing my own all-female show?

After seventeen years of suppression under the Puritans, theatres in England experienced an upsurge of dramatic writing along with vital developments in theatrical practice from 1660 to 1710. “A handful of playwrights and players survived into the Restoration, but essentially the professional theatre had to be recreated, along with the monarchy, in 1660” (Howe 1). Upon taking the thrown, Charles II issued patents to two of his closest courtiers, Sir Thomas Killigrew and Sir William Davenant. Thus, began the age of Restoration theatre.

Killigrew formed the King’s Company and Davenant, the Duke’s Company. These two companies ran side by side for a number of years, holding a duopoly over for-profit professional theatre in London. During this time, both companies began integrating women into the playhouse, as decreed by Charles II in a warrant that ordered “thenceforth only women should

play women's parts" (Wilson 4). Although it was a smooth transition for audiences to accept the playhouses' employment of women, there were many challenges for these women themselves who chose to act upon the stage.

April De Angelis's *Playhouse Creatures* follows the inspirational accounts of Nell Gwyn, Elizabeth Farley, Rebecca Marshall, Doll Common, and Mary Betterton, who were pioneers in the world of female performance. The play, set in 1669 at the King's Company playhouse, is a fictionalized account of these women's experience within Restoration theatre. The plot follows all five of these women as they navigate the world of theatre. Nell Gwyn begins as a server at the "Cock and Pie," then promotes herself to orange seller in the playhouse, until finally she becomes not just an actress, but the most famous Restoration actress in history. Elizabeth Farley begins preaching the Bible on the streets of London, only to find out that the playhouse is looking for a new actress. Elizabeth auditions and successfully joins the King's Company. Rebecca Marshall is a young actress at the King's and over the course of the play, she has an affair with the Earl of Oxford, which eventually leads to her demise. Mary Betterton is the lead actress at the King's, she is a seasoned and excellent performer. However, she is getting older. By the end of the play, she is forced to leave the playhouse and give up her former leading parts to the young actresses. Finally, Doll Common. Doll has been with the playhouse before it was a playhouse, and she is truly the only one who remains with the playhouse until long after all of the other women have gone.

## Theory

Although the integration of women into the playhouse was not overly contested by either the existing players, nor the audience, the women themselves overcame many challenges. The minute these women stepped foot on stage, they were gawked at by the male audience members, who saw them as nothing more than objects placed there for their pleasure. After all, the addition of women into the playhouse was decreed by the King who took up with the actresses as he pleased. The entitlement these men felt toward the actresses is well expressed through the theory of the male gaze and over-sexualization of the women.

First theorized by Laura Mulvey in her essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the male gaze is defined as the “[projection] of male fantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 418). The male gaze, though first coined by a film theorist, can be applied to performance across mediums and is especially applicable to the life of a Restoration actress. Most of the material these actresses studied and acted was written by men, with the exception of a few female playwrights like Aphra Behn, and there were, of course, male audience members. Restoration dramas and comedies were written by men, for men. Therefore, the male gaze can be applied to all elements of the production of theatre during this period. As Mulvey states, “the woman as icon [is] displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men” (421). Mulvey’s argument is that the fundamental difference between man and woman is their sexual difference. This means that the mere fact that a woman does not have a penis, is threatening to men because it causes castration anxiety. This castration anxiety causes men to react in many ways, one being to fetishize the woman so “it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous” (422). This psychoanalysis behind the male gaze allows for further examining of the male gaze in other contexts.

There are many examples of the male gaze as applied to Restoration actresses. Fortunately, Samuel Pepys, an avid theater-goer during the Restoration, kept a diary which contains information regarding theater practices of the time period. This diary has been published and referenced as “a body of closely dated, firsthand evidence as to the history of the theatre in the first decade of Charles the Second’s reign” (Flora vii). Pepys had much to say about the Restoration actresses, especially Nell Gwyn, which illustrates a perfect example of the male gaze implicit in Restoration theatre. Pepys describes Gwyn’s comedic acting in *The Maiden Queen* as “but so great a performance of a comical part was never, I believe in the world before Nell do this” (244). However, as much as Pepys beams at Nell’s acting, most of his writings on Nell focus on her appearance. That is, for one mention of her excellent acting, there are triple the references to her beauty. Pepys even refers to her as a “mighty pretty creature,” which reduces her below her talent and even below a human being (245). The word “creature” used in this context points to the diminishing impact of the male gaze. Meaning, these actresses who risked their status, careers, and very often their own bodies, to become the first professional actresses on the English stage are seen as nothing more than creatures meant for the viewing pleasure of men.

The over-sexualization of these actresses is a direct consequence of the patriarchal system that begins with the King and trickles down into the pits of the playhouses. As Katharine Maus puts it, “everyone from Dryden on has remarked upon the audience’s extraordinarily lively, even obsessive, concern with the actresses’ sexuality” (601). This obsession is woven into the fabric of Restoration theatre in its audience, as seen through Samuel Pepys, as well as its plays. An attribute of Restoration drama is the sexual explicitness of the female roles, especially in Restoration comedies. Since both the King’s Company and the Duke’s Company employed

certain playwrights, who were mostly male, these playwrights wrote with certain actors and actresses in mind. Meaning, “Nell Gwyn and Charles Hart, lovers behind the scenes, played witty, amoral ‘mad couples’ together,” and, “Anne Bracegirdle, who resisted the advances of enamored aristocrats throughout her career... became famous for her portrayal of chaste women in distress” (599). The women were placed by both audiences and playwrights into two categories, as seen through Nell Gwyn and Anne Bracegirdle. That is, the lady and the whore. Both the audience and the playwrights were fully informed of the actress’s sexual lives offstage due to the rise of the actress’s celebrity status.

All of the Restoration actress’s lives were subject to public scrutiny and appraisal due to their unprotected status. As Jessica Munns notes in her essay on the celebrity status of actresses, “the appearance of the actress made an impact on a wider popular culture” (72). They became seen as entertainers: there to serve the public on and off stage, which greatly facilitated interest in their private lives. The actresses were not ladies of status, but they played them on stage. So, the actress herself was somehow in between the binary of a lady and a whore. As Munns explains, “actresses professionally engaged in lives of spectacle and display had every reason to imitate aristocratic women off-stage as well as on-stage” (73). However, the explanation as to why these actresses became such a popular topic of conversation in the public sphere is nothing more than the themes previously discussed: the male gaze and over-sexualization. Once these actresses began integrating into public life through who they went to bed with, the conversations surrounding the actress’s lives off-stage did not cease, rather the public became increasingly fascinated with the scandals of the playhouse.

The integration of women onto the stage worked alongside a growing new perspective on the relationship between men and women. Women began to become known as the opposite sex.

As Maus explains, “as the seventeenth century continues, a model of sexual relations dependent upon polarity rather than upon hierarchy seems to become more and more acceptable” (612).

This aided in the rise of thought that men are the stronger sex, women the weaker. Men are the more intelligent sex, women the less intelligent. Restoration comedies of the period point to this shift in thought, as they explore the relationship between men and women as opposites. This view reifies the gender binary and comes from a base belief that men and women are different because of their biological sex. Through a feminist lens, the Restoration actresses and playwrights were working within the patriarchal system, trying to insert themselves into the existing system. Meaning, these women also believed women and men to be fundamentally different on the basis of sex and they wanted a more female integration into male society through theatre. Whether or not these women would have considered their acts feminist, they were working toward feminist ends. This kind of feminism is known as liberal feminism. As Jill Dolan outlines in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, “it suggests that working within existing social and political organizations will eventually secure women social, political, and economic parity with men” (3).

The actresses fought hard to be of equal standing with their male colleagues. In *Playhouse Creatures*, the younger actresses demand that they have shares in company profits, just as the male actors did. This meant that the actresses would have just as much of a say in artistic matter in the playhouse, as well as a comparable income to the men. Comparable income, status, and freedom was the goal of these women who pioneered professional female performance. This did not overcome the issue of objectification, but it did force the male players to begin shifting their view of their female colleagues. Indeed, the male gaze, over-sexualization,

and celebrity which these actresses encountered as part of their integration into the playhouse, are all still in effect today.

## Analysis

There are three examples in *Playhouse Creatures* that highlight the theories discussed above: Rebecca Marshall and the Earl of Oxford, the feminist debate between Nell Gwyn and Rebecca Marshall, and the final question of the play asked by Doll Common. Building upon the theories of the male gaze, sexualization, celebrity, and feminism, the analysis of these three pieces of the play are essential in the application of research and theory upon a directorial process.

Following Rebecca Marshall in *Playhouse Creatures* is not only heartbreaking, but also perfectly exemplifies the consequences of the patriarchal system and male gaze. As Marshall explains to Elizabeth Farley in the first act of the play, she ended up marrying the Earl of Oxford after he paid to come into the dressing room to watch the actresses changing and insisted on having her. However, the priest that married them was an actor hired by the Earl in order to get Marshall into bed. As she states, “I thought if he’s fool enough to make me his wife, I’ll take him for what I can get. So he had his night... And when I woke up the next morning he was gone” (De Angelis 14). This piece of Marshall’s story ends up destroying her in the end.

After being publicly insulted by the Earl after a performance of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and upon standing up for herself, Marshall is escorted off the stage by her fellow cast mates in order to prevent further harm to the playhouse’s image (12). This incident can only be a consequence of the male gaze, the Earl of Oxford felt entitled to Marshall simply because she was presented on stage in front of him as an object to be acquired. Furthermore, this is an example of the lack of agency these women held due to their positions in the playhouse being dependent on men.

The very last scene in act one of the play is one in which Marshall takes a candle, carves the Earl of Oxford's face into it, and hexes the voodoo doll using a spell from the witches of *Macbeth*. The other actresses in the playhouse join in, helping her to exact her revenge upon him. This moment is important in the overall arch of the piece because it is the first time all of the women take stand together and become one entity. But, of course, this unified moment comes with a price. After the Earl is informed that Marshall publically scorned him, he tries to see to it that she has no other choice than to draw away from the public eye. He calls her a witch and forces her to run away from the playhouse in order to protect herself (52).

Mrs. Marshall: They found another word for me.

Doll: Witch.

Mrs. Marshall: Before I could find one for myself. If they don't get you one way they get you another.

The public was ruthless, just as quick to condemn an actress as to build her up. Marshall is just one example of the celebrity of the life of a Restoration actress and its consequences. The subject of the Restoration actress only ever appeared in public conversation surrounding her sexuality. As Maus concludes, "It is not merely new attitudes toward women and the theater, but the persistence of old ones, which make possible the novel phenomenon of the Restoration actress, and which condition the highly selective enthusiasm of her audience" (615).

A small moment in the play, which actually brings up a powerful debate that is still being had today is one specific conversation between Gwyn and Marshall, in which Marshall condemns Gwyn for wanting to remain as the King's mistress after they are given shares in the King's Company. This becomes a battle of the question: Is equality fighting against the patriarchal standards, as in the case of Marshall who does not want to need to have a keeper, or is it the right to choose, as in the case of Gwyn who still enjoys her relations with the King? As Roxane Gay states in the introduction to *Bad Feminist*, "Feminism is a choice, and if a woman

does not want to be a feminist, that is her right, but it is still my responsibility to fight for her rights. I believe feminism is grounded in supporting the choices of women even if we wouldn't make certain choices for ourselves" (xii).

This moment begs the question: What is true freedom? As seen in this exchange between Gwyn and Marshall (51):

Mrs. Marshall: I imagined not having a keeper. Freedom

Nell: And you got it. We're different that's all. I'm free to do what I want, and you are too.

Mrs. Marshall: Free. To play a faithful wife or an unfaithful wife. A whore, a mistress. We play at being what we are. Where's the freedom in that?

This is part of the feminist debate of the piece. These women attempted to work within the limits of the society in which they lived in order to find some sources of equality or freedom. Marshall refers to the labels that are forced upon them as women and especially as actresses playing the roles of women. Since the roles they performed were mostly written by men, they invoked the ideal standards which women were supposed to uphold. Bound by these chains, the actresses tried to struggle free, but to what avail?

One of the very final moments of the play, between Nell Gwyn and Doll Common, speaks to the question of: what has changed? The two women are in the nether world, or the land of the dead, and Doll Common reminds Gwyn of the fact that they were treated like animals in the playhouse (60).

Doll: Playhouse creatures they called you, like you was animals.

Nell: But we spoke and we was the first!

Doll: And where'd it get you?

This moment, although a heartbreaking way to end the play, is one of the most important moments in understanding why this story must be told. Doll is the one, through her recalling of the events of the play, who calls this story into being. The story must be told because no matter how many times it is told, what is broken is still not mended. The simple fact is, what these women went through is still not gratified. The patriarchy still reins, the male gaze is still very much apparent, women are still seen as objects on the stage or through screens... What has changed? Or, rather, what has *not* changed?

## Application

The main themes I was interested in discussing as a director with my design team and cast were those which I researched in the fall. I wanted to foster discussion about what it means to be women in theatre, and as De Angelis puts it, “women in a land of men” (36). There were a few conversations that we had in the rehearsal room that I felt were facilitated by my experience as a woman in theatre as well as the different areas which I researched for this thesis: in particular, the feminism of the overall piece and the details of each character’s inevitable downfall.

My goal as a director was to make the process feminist. After discussing just what a feminist process might look like with my advisor, Jessica Del Vecchio, I attempted to implement two major things into my directing style: choice and transparency. It was extremely important to me that every woman in the room felt comfortable to express their opinions about any and all artistic matters, whether it was a small detail like an action being played on a certain line, or a larger concept like did Elizabeth Farley tell the Earl of Oxford about Rebecca Marshall’s witchery? It was imperative to me that every aspect of the show be brought up for discussion, if discussion was necessary. My other goal being transparency, I also updated my actors and design team on a daily basis if there were new challenges or opportunities throughout the production. As a feminist director, I hoped to be more of a facilitator and crafter of the piece, rather than a dictator.

One specific conversation we had as a group surrounding the feminism of the piece was in discussing Mary Betterton’s attachment to Lady Macbeth. It was a small conversation, but an important one. When Mrs. B is describing all of the roles she played over her long career as an

actress, she mentions real acting as a “poison” (47). She says that this poison remains with her, even though most of the only real roles in which acting is required are men’s roles. But, she found it in one role, “only in her, the Dark Woman,” meaning Lady Macbeth (47). Discussing this moment of the play launched a greater discussion about the kinds of roles women have to play in the theatre today. All of the women in the room said that they have played a flat female character at some point. However, as many of the cast members remarked, April De Angelis has given five women the opportunity to play complex, intricate female characters in *Playhouse Creatures*. Not only that, but these women really existed. The opportunity to explore the lives of these five Restoration actresses as they navigate the playhouse and the roles they are placed in gives women the chance to explore other women’s lives in a beautiful way. This fosters empathy and understanding between women of the past, present, and future.

Each of the five Restoration actresses, by the end of *Playhouse Creatures*, are completely changed by their experience in the theatre. However, not for the better. Every single woman loses their former life and their former selves due to the patriarchal system. Elizabeth Farley has a child by the King, receives no help, attempts to abort the child, and is forced to leave the playhouse to beg on the street as a prostitute. Rebecca Marshall leaves the playhouse to slip out of the public eye after the Earl of Oxford plans to exact his revenge on her. Mary Betterton is forced out of her long and successful acting career by her own husband due to her age, as she has become too old for the men in the audience to find her attractive. The King offers Nell Gwyn a house with a park and children, but only on the condition that she no longer stays to be an actress. And Doll Common is the only one left behind because she grew up in the playhouse, she lived out her days there, and she remained there through the end.

It was important to me as a director to acknowledge that the play does not follow just one

of these women's stories, it follows them all. Every conversation we had in rehearsal about the Restoration actresses, what they went through, and who they were, we kept coming back to the notion that it was not their faults. Rather, the society in which they lived was not conducive to true equality. Today, it is no different. There were times in rehearsal when an actor was struggling with their intention in a scene where I asked them if they had experienced something similar in their lives, and the answer was almost always yes. As women in theatre, it became our duty to tell these women's stories in the most intentional and honorable way. The reason being, because they gave us so much through their sacrifice. Although they did not accomplish true equality in the theatre, they made necessary strides, which helped future generations.

## Conclusion

In the end, what this entire project was about is honoring our foremothers. It is about recognizing the struggle of women in the past, honoring them, understanding them for who they were, and turning around to make strides for the next generation. That is the feminism of the piece, that is the goal: baby steps. It sounds beautiful, but it is hard. It is hard to walk against the grain, it is hard to stand up, to make our voices heard. But, we do it anyway. We do it for the future, we do it to honor the past. Throughout this process I have learned many valuable lessons as a human being, woman, and director. Producing this play outside of the comfort of the Forbes center was certainly challenging, but I did not waver. I did not question, nor give up. I did not because I knew that this story needed to be told here and now. I was only a vessel through which it could reach people.

The oppression and hardships that the Restoration actresses had to endure were plentiful and horrifying. The patriarchal system and male gaze caused these women to give up their own passion, their own lives. They made small steps toward making the female voice recognizable and commonplace. There are many steps more to take, this is only the beginning. “Now we can say anything” (60).

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