

REMOTE THEATER REVIEW

Edited by Jennifer Thorn

ANGELINA DEL BALZO, *Bilkent University*

Hannah Cowley, *The Convent of Pleasure*.

An online reading presented by Red Bull Theater in New York, NY in collaboration with R/18 Collaborative, presented live and recorded on Zoom on March 14, 2022 and available on Video On Demand from March 14–18, 2022. Directed by Kim Weild. With Heidi Armbruster (Madame Mediator), Becca Ayers (Servant to Lady Happy/M. Facil), Talley Gale (Lady Virtue/M. Advisor), Cloteal Horne (Lady Happy), Anthony Michael Martinez (Take Pleasure/Ambassador), Rami Margron (Princess/Prince), Maria-Christina Oliveras (Lady Amorous/M. Courtly), and Josh Tyson (Dick/Mimic). Program Notes by Liza Blake (University of Toronto).

Even as theaters in North America are beginning to resume traditional live and in-person programming, Zoom theater has not gone away, and there are signs that online staged readings and productions will continue with more frequency and higher professionalism than before the pandemic. Red Bull Theater, a New York company that specializes in performing lesser-known classic drama, continues its robust programming of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century drama by women from the last two years, productions that have included benefit readings of Frances Burney's *The Woman-Hater* and Hannah Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* (reviewed in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 54.4, Summer 2021), now joined by Margaret Cavendish's closet drama *The Convent of Pleasure*. The March 2022 production embraced Cavendish's experimental approach to dramatic form as well as the play's inventive depiction of gender presentation and desire.

This production of *The Convent of Pleasure*, presented in collaboration with the R/18 Collective, a group of eighteenth-century theater scholars dedicated to "re-activating Restoration and eighteenth-century theatre for the twenty-first century,"¹ is one of the most high-profile productions of the group since its founding in 2019. As universities are more than ever emphasizing public engagement, the R/18 Collective suggests one effective possibility open to theater scholars. Liza Blake,

co-director of the Digital Cavendish Project, served as the primary interlocutor for this iteration of Red Bull's usual robust supporting programming. In addition to providing the program notes, Blake introduced the form and content of the play to its nonacademic audience in a five-minute video introduction with director Kim Weild that related Cavendish's dramatic work with that of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, two frequently staged dramatists at Red Bull. Blake highlighted Cavendish's thematic exploration of the seeming difference between the natural and the unnatural, a focus of the plot and of the play's metatheatrical conventions. This production was also publicized by a panel discussion, "The Closet or the Stage? A Conversation about Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*," that was hosted by the R/18 Collective a week before the live performance, at which Misty G. Anderson, Liza Blake, Julie Crawford, and Kristina Straub explained matters including the eighteenth-century "closet" and its relationship to the public stage, Cavendish's Royalist circles, and women playwrights after Cavendish. (Anderson also served as the production's uncredited dramaturg.) The format of the panel and the energy and insight with which the panelists conversed resulted in a lively post-panel Q&A, exemplifying successful engagement beyond the academy with eighteenth-century drama and encouraging future readings and future productions.

In her pre-show conversation with the audience, director Kim Weild emphasized the ways that Cavendish pushed drama forward as a genre, and the production emphasized this innovation by creatively making the most of the Zoom format. The opening minutes of the play, in which Lady Happy's suitors bemoan their unsuccessful attempts to woo various women, were projected in black and white, with background images from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prints. As Lady Happy began to describe the appearance of the convent through the seasons, the screen changed to color, as when Dorothy steps into the technicolor world of Oz, and the interior backgrounds became colorful photographs from seventeenth-century palaces such as Versailles. The production did not return to the colorless landscape of the play's opening, subtly pushing the audience to register that the play's conclusion in marriage (against which characters in the beginning of the play rail) does not signal a return to the conservative status quo but instead the production of a new vision of coupling that challenges the status quo.

Weild's casting choices both brought a contemporary edge to the performances and highlighted thematic complexities in Cavendish's text. The production embraced gender and color-conscious (not "blind") casting principles, which created important moments where the production was able to critically engage with its own script. For example, when Lady Happy describes women as living in a state of slavery, actress Cloteal Horne leaned into the dissonance of seeing a contemporary Black woman saying these lines describing a seventeenth-century white aristocrat: her vocals on that line added an AAVE-inflection of the word "slavery." The reading of that line emphasized the dissonance created by the conflation of aristocratic marriage under patriarchy with the experience of chattel slavery. The performance was able to simultaneously stage the play "as written" while also making an important critique of Cavendish's repetition of a common racist trope in seventeenth-century feminist writing.

The production highlighted the queerness both of the play's central romantic couple, Lady Happy and the Princess/Prince, and of its generic hybridity. The ensemble actresses tripling parts sometimes were shown on camera switching their props and accessories between each role, a metatheatrical move that highlighted Cavendish's playful approach to dramatic genre. While the cast was

mixed gender, actresses Becca Ayers, Talley Gale, and Maria-Christina Oliveras each performed both in female and male parts in the short “plays” within the play that depict marriage as a curse; this cross-gender casting was also evident in their additional roles as suitors. This extensive gender-bending with the rapid role-changes in the play-within-a-play suggested that the theatrical artifice of the latter extends to the performance of gender in the rest of the play as well. Actor Rami Magron, who played the Princess/Prince, is gender fluid, and the production leaned into the queer subtext. Instead of trying to explain or mitigate the queer relationship that culminates in marriage, Weild and Magron take the fluid gender presentation of the Princess/Prince seriously and resisted a staging that would assign a binary categorization to the character. In this moment of heightened violent public transphobia, the decision to embrace the gender ambiguity in the play serves as a powerful reminder of queer peoples’ continued existence throughout history, perhaps nowhere more evident than in the long eighteenth century, and that, as scholars sharing these works with the public is an ethical imperative.

NOTES

1. Home Page,” *R18Collective.org*, accessed June 14, 2022.