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# Paul T Davies Column: Review: Playhouse Creatures, Headgate Theatre, Colchester.

## **Playhouse Creatures, Headgate Theatre, Colchester.**

The English monarchy has been restored, and it's 1669 and the theatres have re-opened after Puritan rule. The king has decreed that, for the first time, women are allowed to legally perform on public stages. The characters in the play include historical figures- probably the best well known being Nell Gwynne, coming to the theatre via the street and inns and becoming mistress of King Charles II. The women quickly discover that fame has its price, that equality is slow to evolve, that men still control the creative and financial strings.

The cast are phenomenal, all five of them seamless in characterisation and ensemble playing. As Doll Common, the world weary poor woman who punctures the fantasy world of the actresses with aplomb, Joanna Peacock is superb, with great comic time and effortless story telling about the theatres of the day. Poppy Borges-Wilby captures the ambition and ruthlessness of Nell Gwynne, (the Instagram queen of her day), with delight, but also making her very human. Charlotte Harknett creates great sympathy for Mrs. Farley, who falls pregnant and has to leave the theatre, tragic and poignant. Eleanor Kent-Dyson is outstanding as Mrs. Betterton, married to the theatre owner, who has to endure him choosing younger actresses to play the lead roles she once owned, and Charlotte Still equally strong as Mrs. Marshall, who falls out of favour and has to flee her wealthy nobleman.

April De Angelis's script is fractured, not perfect, feels like a screenplay with many short scenes, and is reliant on other sources. But the strength of Kerry King's intelligent, clear direction, is that the many joys of the production include the cast performing in the style of the era performing Shakespeare and restoration comedy. Stylish costumes and set design from the creative team made this Headgate Theatre Production one of the productions to beat this year, a beautifully paced and judged show that showcased some of the best local talent.