

Playhouse Creatures

By April De Angelis

AUDITION DATES:

Tuesday 20th November at 7.30pm

Thursday 29th November at 7.30pm

VENUE: Headgate Theatre Studio

PRODUCTION WEEK - 31st March – 6th April 2019

DIRECTOR: Kerry King

REHEARSALS - To be agreed.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT: Kerry King

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It would be very useful if you let the Director know the part/parts you would like to audition for prior to the day

Bawdy, bloody and bold – this earthy account of the lives of some of the first English actresses is deliciously funny yet honest and gritty too. Life was tough and the gutter never far away!

The time is 1669 – London – The monarchy has been restored and, on his return from France, Charles II has brought with him a love of theatre and of actresses! He decrees that women are allowed on the English stage for the first time, much to the delight of their male admirers! Corsets are pulled tight, cleavage revealed and acting talent isn't always required for success. The King and many others turned out in droves to see the newest young beauties, often with the hope of taking one home.

Nell Gwynn becomes the darling of London and catches the eye of the King. But some of the women live for the stage and soon demand more in return for their devotion to the theatre: equal pay and shares in the company!

This play is a Historical Drama; a comedy, but with some very dark twists. We glimpse into the real lives of some of the pioneer English actresses who fought hard for equality yet spent most of their time beating off the advances of some rather unsavoury men. The play deals with modern issues seen through the eyes of 17th Century women and I want to explore ways of merging the two time periods in terms of production and design.

Characters

There are five wonderful acting parts here – all of the women portrayed have interesting stories and the stage time is pretty even between them all.

Doll – described as “timeless...a vagrant” – the inspiration for this character is said to be the ageing prostitute of the same name in “The Alchemist”. Doll is effectively the narrator – an “everywoman” figure – she has seen everything before and has a dark, sharp and deeply perceptive wit that provides much of the social commentary in the play. **Audition speech (prologue) PAGE ONE**

Nell – needs to appear 16 for a major part of the play. She is open, generous, and positive and never forgets her roots. Perhaps she was the first “celebrity”? She provides a great deal of the play’s energy and is often a great foil for Doll’s wit. Audition scene (first scene with Mrs Farley) **PAGE 4 SCENE 2**

Mrs Farley -begins the play as a naïve, recently bereaved Puritan minister's daughter. Her journey marks the story of many young actresses of the era who were certainly blinded by the promise of "lace" and "accoutrements". **Audition scene (first scene with Nell) PAGE 4 SCENE 2**

Mrs Betterton – (bit younger than Doll – ideally?) the wife of Thomas Betterton – another "real" character, Mrs Betterton discovers that she is a relic of a bygone era. Her formidable acting style, her looks and perhaps her love of theatre itself appear to be out of fashion. Initially we may laugh at her, but increasingly we recognise that her plight is all too familiar. **Audition PAGE 61-62**

Mrs Marshall – (older than Mrs Farley) perhaps the most modern of all the characters, Mrs Marshall campaigns for equality and "shares" in the theatre's profits for the actresses. She has an endearing regard for Mrs Betterton's passion and unfortunately comes to a rather sobering recognition of the hopelessness of her situation. **Audition PAGE 42-44**

PLEASE NOTE

We will also be reading Scenes 9 and 10 from Act One and Scenes 2 and 3 from Act Two to get a feel of the five actresses working together.

PROLOGUE

Doll Common enters. *She is sixty or so. She seems a vagrant, timeless. She warms her hands at a small fire. She addresses the audience.*

Doll It is a fact that I was born. That is a fact. The how was in that old eternal way, but the when I shall not divulge. No, I'll keep that hugged close to my chest like a sick cat.

Pause.

Once this was a playhouse, and before that, a bear pit. On a hot day, I swear you could still smell the bears. They used to rag me. "That ain't the bears, Doll, that's the gentlemen!" But it was bears because upon occasion as I swept I came upon their hair. Tufts of it bunched up in corners which I saved. As a small child, my father was the bear keeper. I remember the bears moaning at night, and licking the wounds at their throats where the irons cut in and sighing, for while bears love to dance they hate to do it for a whip. Indeed, under those conditions, I believed they preferred the fighting to the dancing, even as blood was spilt and death faced. Sometimes I still hear their cries, very faint and in the wind. *(She stops and listens)*

Scene Two

The whole atmosphere changes as Mrs FARLEY enters. The stage becomes light, resembling a summer's day on a London street.

Mrs FARLEY *speechifies in religious tones.*

Mrs FARLEY And lo It is written in our Lord's book

That this time shall come to pass.

And ye have only to look about ye and ye will see that it has come to pass.

Yes, it hath.

NELL *enters, as if from a pub doorway. She holds a jug.*

NELL *(calling in)* All right! All right! In a bleedin' minute!

She sighs in exasperation and sits down.

Mrs FARLEY Ye shall see that the cows do not give sweet milk but are dry except for stinking curdles.

Ye shall find all men to be cheats and their hair to be lice riddled.

Yeah, ye shall discover even the women at your hearth to be fornicators!

NELL *(calling in once more)* I'm having a fucking break!

Mrs FARLEY And a great plague of locusts will settle in the fields and pester your cows... *(She starts to cry)*

NELL You crying? Don't take it personal. I always shout.

Mrs FARLEY Usually I take round the hat. Just then I was making it up. Could you tell?

NELL Seemed all right.

Mrs FARLEY He was my dad, the preacher. It was last rites all summer with the plague. He said God was protecting him. And then, just last week, when it seemed to be over, the boils came up. Purple. Behind his knees. This morning thought I better just carry on. You know. This was our spot.

Pause.

There's a lot of work to be done. Stamping out heathen decadence.

NELL How much did you get today, then? Stamping.

Mrs FARLEY Well...

NELL Go on.

Mrs FARLEY I've not earnt a penny. What am I going to do? I could starve!

NELL That's 'cos you don't know how to work a crowd. I sold oysters with me sister. We had a patter. Crowds like patter.

Mrs FARLEY A patter?

NELL You know: "Oyster sucking's better than—"

Mrs FARLEY *(interrupting)* We spread God's plain and holy word.

NELL It's like you've got to have a bit of cunning.

Mrs FARLEY Cunning?

NELL To get what you want.

Mrs FARLEY I'm not sure. I think cunning is against my religion.

NELL God helps those who help themselves. I got meself a job at the *Cock and Pie*.

Mrs FARLEY I've heard about places like that.

NELL I serve strong waters to the gentlemen.

Mrs FARLEY I've heard it's the devil's own armpit.

NELL It has a decent, reg'lar sort of clientele.

A bellow is heard from the Cock and Pie.

On the whole. You do get the odd difficult customer. There's one bloke won't take no for an answer. I told him I wouldn't go with him. Not for sixpence. I know where he's been.

Mrs FARLEY Where's that?

NELL With me sister, and she'd do anybody.

Mrs FARLEY Well, I better go.

NELL Where?

Mrs FARLEY It's four o'clock. That's when I used to wash my dad's collars.

NELL No point washing 'em now. You never liked washing 'em, did you?

Pause.

Mrs FARLEY No.

They laugh.

It's only I can't think what else to do.

Pause.

NELL Do you know poetry? I'll give you sixpence if you teach me a bit poetry.

Mrs FARLEY Poetry?

NELL Can you say it?

Mrs FARLEY "The angel of the Lord came down and glory shone around."

NELL Brilliant.

NELL *gives her sixpence.* **Mrs FARLEY** *takes it.*

That a deal then? You won't starve now.

Mrs FARLEY Not today. Why do you want know poetry?

NELL For a job.

Mrs FARLEY At the *Cock and Pie*?

NELL No. Across the street. The playhouse.

Mrs FARLEY The playhouse! That den of defilement! That pit of pestilence!

NELL I've seen the ladies. They've got lovely dresses.

Mrs FARLEY Have they?

NELL I've crept in the back. The candlelight shines their hair so their hair seems like flames. Glittering buckles on their shoes. Gold lace dresses.

Mrs FARLEY Lace! Do they fornicate?

NELL Fuck knows. They speak poetry and walk about. *(She demonstrates, speaking in a posh voice)*

"Oysters, oysters, by the shell or by the cup.

Slide 'em down your gullet to keep your pecker up."

Mrs FARLEY And they want ladies?

NELL Just one.

Mrs FARLEY Just one. Oh.

NELL I heard 'em talking. In the pub. Teach me now.

Mrs FARLEY I need to fetch things. A book of poetry. From my lodgings.

NELL I'll come with you.

Mrs FARLEY No. It's not far. You wait. I'll meet you back here.

(She moves to the exit)

NELL I'll wait then. *(She calls after her)* Here, I don't know your name.

Mrs FARLEY Elizabeth. Elizabeth Farley.

NELL And I'm Nellie. Nellie Gwyn.

Mrs FARLEY *exits.*

MRS BETTERTON

Mrs Betterton I used to work in the wardrobe. And I used to watch and watch and wonder what it would be like. You know, to...

Nell What?

Doll Do it. The acting.

Mrs Betterton I used to help my husband with his lines. And naturally, I learnt them too. Then one day, he was playing Othello, and his Iago fell sick. He ate something that disagreed with him. A pork pie. Anyway, it was rotten. Mr Betterton was caught short and could not find anyone else at such little notice to do the part. Except for me. I'd read it with him many times. We knew it could mean trouble if the bishops found me out, being a woman, but we were younger and reckless and we thought no-one would ever know.

Nell What happened?

Mrs Betterton We got away with it. We were very close, Mr Betterton and I, and it was as if I hung off his breath, and he off mine, and the words flew between us. That was my first time.

Pause.

After that we did it on a regular basis. My fool to his Lear, his Falstaff to my Hal. And then, of course, the day came when everything changed and for the first time we women were permitted by Royal decree to act upon a stage. A great stir it caused. And I was one of the first ever and when I spoke, a great hush descended on the house, and it was as if the men and women gathered there were watching a miracle, like water turning to wine or a sick man coming to health.

Pause.

It was then I knew that I had done a terrible thing and that nothing would ever be the same for me again. I had tasted a forbidden fruit and its poisons had sunk deep into my soul. You see, Iago is like a whip that drives the life around him, when Hal makes a choice the whole world holds its breath. I never forgot that feeling. The poison's still in my blood. Like a longing. A longing. I looked for that poison everywhere and couldn't find it. Not in the Desdemonas or Ophelias. Only in her, the dark woman.

Pause.

We were partners for many years. And when he told me it was over, I swear he had tears in his eyes. I had never seen him cry before, except, of course, when the part required it.

Pause.

Nell You better go home, Mrs B.

Mrs Betterton I'm waiting.

Doll Better wait at home. Not here. You don't want him finding you. He'll think you've gone funny.

Mrs Betterton I've never missed a cue.

Nell We know that. We know.

Mrs Marshall You can't stay sitting here.

Mrs Betterton Then I shall approach my husband once more for tomorrow's performance. I am not above a woman selling artichokes.

Mrs Betterton *exits.*

MRS MARSHALL

Mrs Farley What do you know!

Mrs Marshall *stops her carving.*

Mrs Marshall There. *(She holds it up)*

Nell What is it?

Mrs Marshall *gives it to her.*

Mrs Marshall have a look.

Nell Ain't it good! A little man. A wax man.

She tries to show Mrs Farley.

Mrs Marshall Homunculus.

Nell He's got a little mouth. His mouth is open. Like a cry.

She offers it to doll.

Doll I'm not touching it. It has hair. Melted on the top.

Mrs Marshall I had a lock of his hair. The Earl of Oxford. He gave it to me. A love token.

Mrs Betterton *also looks.*

Mrs Betterton Rebecca Marshall, that is evil. What are you doing now?

Mrs Marshall I'm sticking a pin in the bastard's neck.

They wince.

That is for the shit rubbed into my hair.

Nell It has gone right through!

Mrs Farley Will he feel it?

Mrs Marshall *sticks another pin in.*

Mrs Marshall That is for crying whore!

Mrs Betterton He will be in pain.

Doll He will be in bleedin' agony.

Another pin goes in.

Nell That's his bollocks.

Mrs Betterton It is witchery!

Mrs Marshall *holds up the Doll, centre.*

Mrs Marshall Round about the cauldron go.

In the poison entrails throw.

Toad that under cold stone

Days and nights has thirty-one

Sweltered, sleeping, venom got

Boil thou first in the charm'd pot.

Mrs Betterton Fillet of a fenny snake

I n the cauldron boil and bake.

Mrs Marshall Eye of newt and toe of frog

Wool of bat and tongue of dog.

Mrs Betterton Adder's fork and blind worm's sting.

Mrs Farley Lizard's leg and howlet's wing.

Mrs Betterton For a charm of powerful trouble

Like a hell broth boil and bubble.

Mrs Farley, Mrs Betterton, Mrs Marshall, Doll *together*

Double double toil and trouble

Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Nell *joins in with a demonic version of her jig.*

Double double toil and trouble

Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

The chant grows to a crescendo as Mrs Marshall throws the doll to the floor and tramples it underfoot.

Double double toil and trouble

Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Mrs Marshall Never prosper! *(She spits on it. She addresses the actresses)* He was my keeper. Now look at him.

Mrs Farley You need a keeper.

DOLL You won't get another one.

Mrs Marshall I don't want another one. I had a husband once. You wouldn't have known me. I used to creep about. He liked me to be quiet. *(She picks up pieces of the doll and puts them in her pocket)*

Mrs Farley I want a drink. If he don't want me. Someone else will. Won't they?

DOLL Course.

Mrs Marshall I went out last night. To a salon. Someone remarked that he'd never known of so much interest in the theatre, not since we actresses had arrived. Could I corroborate that, he asked? Oh yes, I said. Certainly. I'll corroborate it. "You'll be wanting to own the theatres next", he said. "Profits and all".

Pause.

I'll have a drink too. *(To SELL)* You coming?

NELL In a bit.

MRS BETTERTON I shall not be joining you. We have old friends for supper.

MRS BETTERTON, Mrs Marshall and Mrs Farley *exit.*