

THE RESTORATION OF NELL GWYN

Adult Learning



THE RESTORATION OF NELL GWYN is not only a great entertainment, but also is packed with information and ideas about the 17th century, especially in relation to women, patriarchy and the Restoration theatre. The show also features beautiful songs by Henry Purcell, which explore the emotional undercurrents of the play through the contemporary music of the era, the English baroque.

- Theatre (the Restoration theatre explored through a contemporary play)
- History (The English Revolution/Civil War and the Restoration)
- Women's Studies (Women and patriarchy in the 17th century and The first English actresses)

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THE RESTORATION OF NELL GWYN
An Ensemble and York Theatre Royal Co-production
in association with Park Theatre



Angela Curran as MARGERY

SYNOPSIS AND CHARACTERS

Steve Trafford's new comedy, *THE RESTORATION OF NELL GWYN*, with songs by Henry Purcell, brings to life a fascinating 'post-revolutionary' era in British history, especially with regard to women; as comediennes, as independent spirits, as sex objects/workers. Nell Gwyn was one of the first actresses allowed onto the English stage by Charles II, the newly 'restored' monarch, who overturned the puritanical tyranny which followed the English Civil War. Nell became one of Charles II's many 'Royal Mistresses', but never lost her connection to the gutter, from whence she came; reared in a brothel, abused, yet indomitable.

The play is set in Nell's parlour in her Pall Mall lodgings in London, just down the road from the Palace of Westminster, where Charles II lies ill. It is February 1685. Nell is in a panic... What will become of her if Charles dies? Who will support her? Will England be plunged once more into war and conflict? If only she could worm her way into the Palace and beguile the King into dubbing her Countess of Greenwich!

Nell is a bundle of comic contradictions, teased out and challenged by Margery, Nell's maid. But Margery has a secret she has never told, and as the play unfolds, the women learn more about each other than they bargained for. They hatch a plot for Nell to enter the Royal Bedchamber, dressed as a man in one of her old stage 'breeches role' costumes. They have a great time deciding 'What sort of Adam she should best be?!' Off sets Nell, full of hopeful expectation, but the plot fails and, at last, the bell tolls that Charles has met his Maker. However, in facing this disaster together, Nell and Margery have travelled an unexpected journey. By the end of the play, they are both changed forever.

THE RESTORATION OF NELL GWYN is a celebration and exploration of two extraordinary female characters full of wit and ingenuity who must grapple with their uncertain positions in a topsy-turvy, patriarchal world. The play's themes include love, death, sex, religion and politics set against the backdrop of Restoration England. Nell's stories of the theatre vividly bring to life the vivacity of the Restoration stage, and Purcell's haunting songs, sung by Nell, interweave the action with the beautiful music of the Baroque.



THE WRITER'S VISION OF THE PLAY AND THE WRITING PROCESS

Steve Trafford

I'd heard of Nell Gwyn: the gutter snipe orange seller who became Charles II's mistress, and I was curious why her name still lives on in popular memory: there's a pub named after her in Drury lane, and a horse race, the Nell Gwyn stakes, is still run at Newmarket. I began to dig deeper and discovered a rich and fascinating character who was one of the first actresses to be allowed to perform on the English stage. I worked closely with Elizabeth Mansfield who was to play Nell, and who brought all her knowledge of what it is to be an actress today, to the process.

We began by reading all the background material we could find, advised by Laura Gowing, Professor of Early Modern History at Kings College London. What emerged was a vision of the play as much more than a 'biodrama' of Nell Gwyn, instead a more complex and powerful take on the lives of women in the 17th Century: A piece that would bring with it echoes of the past still resonant in today's world.

We created a second fictional character, Margery, Nell's maid, who was not simply a foil for Nell, but a strong determined woman, who harbours a view of the world kept hidden from her mistress. This secret drives the narrative of the play and explodes in the 3rd Act in a classic 'reveal'. We used the songs of Henry Purcell, Nell's contemporary and friend, to comment on the action and take the story forward.

After writing several versions of the play, all of which ended in the waste paper basket, we arrived at a 'final' draft which we sent to Damian Cruden, Artistic Director of the York Theatre Royal, who was to direct. We held a 'read-through' workshop in York, with the full creative team present, who all contributed creative suggestions for re-writes.

Finally we took the play into a three week rehearsal, where Damian, Elizabeth, Angela Curran (playing Margery), Geoffrey Williams, our assistant Director and myself, worked together to develop the play further; making cuts, where the text was overlong or obscure, and re-shaping to sharpen, clarify, or open up the drama. A collaborative process that took the play to another level, discovering what we had created, and polishing it to its full potential until THE RESTORATION OF NELL GWYN finally arrived on stage.



Elizabeth Mansfield & Angela Curran

THEMES OF THE PLAY

Although 'The Restoration of Nell Gwyn' is written as a comedy, the underlying situation facing both characters in the play is grave. Charles II lies ill and may die. If he does, then Nell Gwyn's economic security is dangerously threatened since she is entirely dependent on him. And Margery, in turn, is dependent on Nell. This theme of **dependency** is explored throughout the play, specifically in relation to women living in a patriarchal, monarchical society. Emotional dependency is explored too; Nell's dependency on King Charles and both women's upon each other.

Love is another key theme of the play; romantic love, sexual love; maternal love; the love of friends. As the characters reveal more about their life experiences and feelings, so we understand more and more about the complexities of this most basic of human emotions.

The death of King Charles hovers continually over the action. **Death** is a frequent theme of both women's narratives; death by Plague, by perforation of a sword, by drowning in a puddle (Nell's mother), by hanging at Tyburn Tree, by one's own hand. Death is always present and has to be faced.

Both characters are survivors, they have had to be. The **survival** theme is explored through the stories the women share about their lives and through their responses to the crisis in which they find themselves. Nell and Margery are both clever, witty, resourceful women and it is the ingenious engagement of these qualities in dealing with their perilous situation that fuel the comedy of the play.



A THEATRICAL LANGUAGE FOR THE PLAY

A new play always offers exciting challenges to the creative team involved in its production; how to realise its mise-en-scene, lighting, soundscape, presentation of material... What is the world of the play? Would it better be served by a **naturalistic** approach? ...an **expressionistic** one?

Every member of the creative team for 'The Restoration of Nell Gwyn' had worked collaboratively together, in different combinations, across several previous productions, so we had shared experiences and ideas to bring to this exciting, new project.

Starting with the text: Inside and outside

The play was written for two characters: Nell Gwyn and Margery, her maid. It tells/shows a precise moment in time from Nell's life in 1685, but the audience are invited to examine what they see from a modern perspective. **Margery** speaks directly to the audience. She

delivers 'The Prologue', which not only sets the scene for the play but also establishes her relationship with the audience. She delivers 'The Epilogue', too, which sums up the play. During the action Margery makes the audience complicit through her 'asides' which wittily deliver her commentary on Nell Gwyn and the patriarchal world they inhabit. Margery moves fluidly from being **outside** the action, through her asides, and **inside** the action, when she is directly engaged with Nell and the world of the play.

The audience see **Nell Gwyn** her through Margery's eyes, though Nell is firm of opinion and makes her arguments about the way she sees the world to Margery. The audience are witnesses to Nell, but Nell doesn't have Margery's privilege of addressing them directly. She stays inside the action except perhaps when she sings. Six songs of Henry Purcell are included in the piece. Two of these 'bookend' the show, twinned with the Prologue and the Epilogue, and sit 'outside' the action. The remaining four songs are set 'inside' the flow of the play but could be indicated as being separate from the action, e.g., through the attitude of the performer and/or a lighting change.

A MISE-EN-SCENE AND HOW TO LIGHT IT

This notion of 'inside' and 'outside' fed directly into **Richard Aylwin** (designer) and **Nao Nagai**'s (lighting designer) approach to creating and lighting the 'mise-en-scene'. They had to factor in that whatever they designed would be toured to several different community venues, some of which had limited resources and equipment.

They created a functional, simple, striking setting to serve the action, based on a circle. Inside the circle is expressed the world of Nell Gwyn; a chair for Nell and one for Margery are separated by a telescopic lighting stand, swathed in grey gauze, which drapes and delineates the circular playing area. Lights suspended on the lighting stand shine through the draped gauze, creating a beautiful, soft, warm heart to the picture. This inviting inner circle is surrounded by unlit, empty space: An inner world, contained and warm; an outer world, dark and threatening.

The play's address to both past and present is mirrored in the choices made in this setting. The chairs are modern, simple, industrial aluminium. The lighting stand and its lanterns are modern, though the draped gauze softens and modifies the picture, consciously borrowing from the way light is used in Dutch oil paintings of the 17th century. The costumes that Nell and Margery wear are detailed, authentic clothes from the late 1600s. Similarly, the guitar Nell plays is a Baroque guitar, but the unobtrusive stand it rests on is modern. 'Then' and 'now' sit side by side in the 'mise-en-scene', a physical commentary on the multi-layered address of the play. The setting is clearly 'expressionistic' but the costumes, clothes and props are 'naturalistic', and as close as possible to 'the real thing'.



A Baroque Guitar

REVOLUTION AND RESTORATION: A TIMELINE

- 1625** Charles I comes to the throne and marries the French princess Henrietta Maria. Her Catholic religion enrages many protestant Parliamentarians and she is prohibited from being crowned in an Anglican service, so she has no coronation.
- 1629** Charles I dissolves Parliament and for the next eleven years rules by decree.
- 1630** Henrietta Maria gives birth to Charles II.
- 1640** In desperate need of revenue, Charles I calls the 'Short Parliament' which is quickly dissolved when it refuses to grant taxes to the Crown.
- 1642** Charles I is convinced that a group of Protestant 'Puritan' MP's are intent on turning the London mob against him, and also plan to impeach and imprison the Queen for alleged involvement in Catholic plots. Charles stages a military coup, entering Parliament in an attempt to arrest the dissident MP's. This was the catalyst for the Wars of the English Revolution, and all that followed.
- 1642** Charles declares war on Parliament, setting up his royal standard on Castle Hill, Nottingham, summoning his loyal subjects to join him. Inauspiciously for Charles I, the standard itself was blown down the same night 'by a strong and unruly wind'. The theatres are closed to prevent disorderly gatherings and stay closed for the next 18 years
- 1644** Oliver Cromwell, one of the dissident MP's and a devoutly religious 'Puritan', joins the Parliamentary army leading a cavalry troop. He helps to form the New Model Army, the Roundheads, and inflicts a crushing defeat on Charles I and his Cavalier army, in Yorkshire, at the battle of Marston Moor.
- 1646** The battle of Naseby lasts just three hours and in that time most of the Royalist army were killed or taken prisoner. The Royalists also lost all of their artillery and supplies. Charles flees the battlefield in surrender. His son Charles II flees to Jersey and thence to France.
- 1647** The most radical dissidents serving in the victorious New Model Army were called the 'Levellers' and believed in one man one vote to elect a government, and equality before law, for all. Cromwell opposed their democratic aspirations, insisting only those with land and property, with a 'permanent fixed interest in the kingdom' should have the vote. Ultimately Cromwell destroyed the Leveller movement, imprisoning many, and famously executing several radical soldiers in Burford churchyard. In the UK, all men over the age of 21, who were without property or land, only received the vote in 1918. It wasn't until 1928 that all women over 21 were granted the vote.
- 1649** After an abortive attempt at a second Civil War Charles I is captured. His son, Charles II escapes again. Charles I is put on trial, charged with subverting the laws and liberties of the nation and maliciously making war on the parliament and people of England. Charles I is publicly executed, his head severed from his body on the block, at Whitehall. England thence becomes a Republic. 300,000 people were killed in the

English Revolutionary war, 6% of the population. Oliver Cromwell was amongst those who signed Charles I's death warrant.

- 1650** Nell Gwyn is born in abject poverty, reared in a coal cellar in Turnshite Alley, off Covent Gardens. Her mother is a prostitute.
- 1653** Oliver Cromwell is declared Lord Protector of England and sets about creating a Puritanical Society.
- 1658** September 3rd - Oliver Cromwell dies at Whitehall in London, probably from malaria or from blood poisoning following an infection. Without Cromwell's ruthless controlling hand, the Republic slides into chaos during the next two years, as Cromwell's weak son, Richard Cromwell, known by the London mob as 'Limp Dick', took over the position of Lord Protector
- 1660** In desperation and fear of another Civil war, Parliament invites back Charles II, who sails into Dover to be restored to the throne.
- 1661** Charles II was a lover of theatre and his years in France made him delight in the rich and often bawdy French style, which included female actresses appearing on stage, something which had never been allowed in the English theatre tradition where boys and men played all female roles. Charles II issues Royal Patents - Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant, quickly build two fine new playhouses.
- 1665** Nell Gwyn plucked from selling oranges in the theatre's 'stinking pit', is given her first small part in the 'Indian Emperor' by John Dryden. During the next five years she becomes the most famous of Restoration actresses. She was possessed of a comic talent, a fine voice, a ready wit and fierce determination.
- 1665** The Great Plague hits London. Charles and his court head off to Oxford. The King's Players (including Nell) followed them, though His Majesty does not appear to have noticed her charms at this time. 68,000 of the Londoners they left behind died of the Plague.
- 1666** The Great Fire of London. 80% of the city is destroyed. The fire actually helped impede the spread of the Plague, as most of the disease-carrying rats were killed in the blaze.
- 1669** Charles II sees Nell perform and invites her to his bedchamber. She becomes one of the many Royal Mistresses kept by the shamelessly licentious Charles II.
- 1670** Charles signs the Secret Treaty of Dover, whereby he secretly promises Louis XIV of France he will declare himself a Catholic, and re-establish Catholicism in England, in return for money from France, thereby freeing Charles from the English Parliament's financial stranglehold over him.
- 1673** Parliament, getting wind of this Treaty forces Charles to accept a Test Act, excluding all Catholics from all office, including the crown.
- 1675** Sir Peter Lely paints a glorious portrait of Nell Gwyn. It now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery.

- 1678** The Protestant Parliament introduces an Exclusion Bill, specifically excluding Charles's brother James, Duke of York, from the succession because James was openly Catholic. Charles dissolves Parliament in 1679 declaring there would be no talk of change of succession. He now rules as absolute monarch without a parliament, financed by the Catholic Louis XIV. Even today, in English law, no catholic can become monarch.
- 1685** Charles II dies in 1685, and is secretly received into the Roman Catholic Church on his deathbed..
- 1687** Nell Gwyn dies of apoplexy at the age of 37.
- 1688** Charles II is succeeded by his brother James II, known by the London mob as 'Dismal Jimmy' for his devout Catholic beliefs. He lasted only two years as king before Parliament shipped in the Protestant William of Orange from Holland to take over the English throne.



Charles II by Sir Peter Lely

HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF 'THE RESTORATION'

The seventeenth century in England was a time of bloody conflict, much of it fuelled by religious rivalry between believers in the Catholic faith and those who were Protestants. The Spanish Armada's attempted invasion in 1588 had been followed by 20 years of war with Catholic Spain. And the attempt to blow up Parliament by the Catholic Guy Fawkes in 1605, had added further fuel to the flames. To this day we burn effigies of Guy Fawkes on bonfire night...

***"Remember, Remember the fifth of November?
Gunpowder, Treason and Plot!"***



Guy Fawkes & other plotters

Charles I, who became king in 1625, was suspected of being a closet catholic, as he had married a catholic princess, and soon a battle for power between Charles and the mainly Protestant Parliament grew, until it exploded into Civil War. On the one side the Parliamentarians, known as the Roundheads led by Oliver Cromwell, and on the other the Royalist supporters of the King, known as the Cavaliers. The Civil war ended in 1649 when Charles I's armies were defeated and he was captured, then beheaded in Whitehall after a trial for Treason. His son, later to be Charles II, fled to France.

After the execution of Charles I, the various factions in parliament began to squabble amongst themselves. In frustration Oliver Cromwell took over the reins of power. He dismissed parliament and appointed himself 'Lord Protector' with powers akin to a monarch. His continuing popularity with the army propped up his regime.

When Oliver Cromwell died, in 1658, he was succeeded as Lord Protector by his son, Richard, a weak leader, who was soon ridiculed on the streets as 'Limp Dick'. Soon England collapsed into arguments between the army and Parliament and into financial chaos. George Monck, one of the army's most capable officers, decided that only bringing back the monarchy could end the political chaos, and Charles II was invited to return from exile. He was restored to power in 1660, and henceforth the period of his rule became known as 'The Restoration'.

"England is not a free people, till the poor that have no land,
have a free allowance to dig and labour the commons..."
Gerrard Winstanley, 1649



WHO WERE THE ROUNDHEADS?

The **Roundheads** were so-called because of their fashion of wearing short, 'pudding bowl' haircuts, as opposed to the long flowing locks sported by the **Cavaliers**. They were devout Protestants, and those of the most extreme belief were known as Puritans. To them the Pope of Rome and the Catholic Cavaliers were the spawn of the devil. They despised them for their loose living, for their indulgence in wine, dancing and singing.

But many Roundheads were also hard-headed businessmen, who resented paying exorbitant taxes to fund the King and his court. So the stand-off between the self-made merchants and traders in parliament and the hereditary monarch and landed aristocracy became more than a religious war. It became a Revolutionary war.

England moved from being a Monarchy, with a King who claimed a God-given 'Divine Right' to rule, to become a Republic ruled by Parliament. But only the wealthy landowners and businessmen had the vote and many of the Roundheads in the rank and file of the army wished to take the Revolution even further.

These radical revolutionaries demanded votes for all, including women. They were known as **The Levellers**, believing as they did that society should be 'levelled' and all should be treated as equal, that: '**The poorest he hath as much a life to live as the richest**' That England should be a Commonwealth, a '**common treasury for all to share**'.

However, after a bitter struggle within the Roundhead faction, the Levellers were defeated and Oliver Cromwell set up a Dictatorship, rejecting the right of the common people to have any say at all about who ruled them.



Angela Curran

WOMEN IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Patriarchy

Although Queen Elizabeth 1 'Good Queen Bess' had ruled Britain for 44 years until 1603, ordinary women, rich and poor alike, were expected to 'be subject to their husbands and fathers' during the 17th Century. The preservation of patriarchal power was central to social, political and spiritual order: Fathers disposed of daughters in arranged marriages, brothers superseded sisters in all inheritance, and husbands took possession of everything a woman owned, once the marriage vow was signed. Patriarchy held sway all the way up to the (male) God head and ruled absolutely.

Work

In the 17th century the professions (lawyer, doctor) were closed to women. But women worked at spinning cloth or as tailors, milliners, dyers, shoemakers and embroiderers. Women washed clothes, worked as brewers, bakers, confectioners. They sold foodstuffs in the streets, worked as midwives and apothecaries, or 'in service' to a wealthier household. Wherever they worked their pay was significantly less than men's. Sound familiar?! But for the most part, women's lives were centred on rearing children and managing the household, whether this was an earthen floor hovel or a mansion. Households in the countryside were largely self-sufficient. A farmer's wife milked cows, fed animals, grew herbs and vegetables, baked her family's bread and brewed beer (it was not safe to drink water), cleaned, made and washed clothes. She was responsible for curing bacon, salting meat and making pickles, jellies and preserves (all of which were essential in an age before fridges and freezers). She kept bees, made candles and soap, and spun

wool and linen. She took produce to market. She also needed some knowledge of medicine to be able to treat her family's illnesses. Only the wealthy could afford a doctor. She was kept very, very busy.

Wealthier women were not idle either. In a big house they had to organize and supervise the servants and, if her husband was away, the woman usually ran the estate. A merchant's wife would do the accounts and manage the business if her husband 'was abroad'. Often when a merchant wrote his will he left his business to his wife - because *she* would be able to run it!

There was no safety net in the 17th Century. If a poor unmarried or widowed woman slipped below the breadline, her only option was to throw herself on the mercy of the Parish, who were as likely to whip her out of town as to give her help. She would then be forced into vagrancy, thieving or prostitution.

Radical stirrings

The English civil war had 'turned the world upside down' and the emergence of radical groupings such as the Levellers, and non-conformist religions, particularly the Quakers, led to new possibilities for women. The idea that God was in everyone, even a woman, and that any person could have a direct dialogue with 'Him', meant that women's voices were validated in a new way. Quaker women lead prayers, protested and campaigned. In 1649, London women petitioned on behalf of the imprisoned leaders of the Levellers and, ten years later, 7,000 Quaker women petitioned against the 'Tithe', a ten per cent tax on everyone's income that went to every local Anglican priest. An extraordinary feat of organisation in a time before phones and the internet!



Drawings of English women by Wenceslaus Hollar (circa 1640)

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Elizabeth Mansfield

NELL GWYN AND THE FIRST ENGLISH ACTRESSES

It was in late 1660 that a professional actress first appeared on the English stage. Before that time women had performed in amateur Mystery plays but never in the commercial theatre. Female roles had been traditionally played by boys and young men, such as the famed Edward Kynaston, whom when Samuel Pepys saw him perform, he described as 'the prettiest woman in the whole house'. The advent of women onto the stage steadily made Kynaston's transvestite performances more and more a curiosity.

Few professional opportunities existed for women in the 17th Century, so the job of a player was exceptional in giving women a prominent position in a public arena. But the generally inferior status of women and their exclusion from power meant that they were paid less, and were less numerous than the men, in the theatre companies newly formed at Charles II's Restoration. An experienced male actor would receive 50 shillings a week, but a woman only 30 shillings, and that money would be paid to her husband, as in the 17th Century all married women had their incomes controlled by their husbands. No wonder two of the greatest English actresses of the time, Elizabeth Barry and Anne Bracegirdle, stayed single all their lives!

Nell Gwyn was employed by 'Orange Moll' to sell oranges in theatres during performances. Straight from the gutter, Nell had a sharp tongue and could readily make bawdy banter with her customers, high and low, in pit and gallery. She was soon spotted by Charles Hart, a handsome debonair actor, who specialised in playing the wild gallant. He coached Nell and with her developed the 'Gay Couple' double act, two stock characters which became the staple of Restoration drama - a pair of feisty lovers, witty, anti-moral and sprightly. John Dryden became a master at creating 'Gay Couple' dramas and wrote parts tailor-made for Nell Gwyn and Charles Hart.

Nell excelled in comedy, particularly in playing 'breeches roles': essentially male impersonations. As the tom-rig, 'mad girl' in breeches (britches), she would satirise the gaudy fashion of the court, where men sported long periwigs, wore powdered make-up, wide coronation breeches, and muffs, all bedecked with gaudy ribbons. For Restoration male audiences, accustomed to seeing ladies in demure petticoats and skirts which brushed the floor, a woman in breeches revealing her ankles, legs and naked thighs was thrilling entertainment. In truth it is likely that Charles II's real motive in allowing the first women onto the stage was to have them bare their flesh, their 'secret parts', for the delight and titillation of himself and his libertine court.



AN ACTOR ON 'FINDING THE CHARACTER'

Elizabeth Mansfield (Nell Gwyn)

How should I approach playing the role of Nell Gwyn? Through the methodology of Brecht? Or Stanislavski? Or both? Or....? **Stanislavski** invites the actor to build a character from the inside out; to invest in painstaking research and a psychological approach, with the aim of inviting an audience's empathy with the emotional world of the character. **Brecht**, on the other hand, invites the actor to 'present' a character; to make clear decisions about 'what you want to show' so as to best serve the questions raised by the play, and to keep the audience awake, alert and thinking.

Restoration Theatre with its 'asides', 'prologues', 'epilogues' 'set dance or masque' sequences etc. seems to invite a Brechtian approach to creating character, even though Brecht was serving a completely different theatrical agenda, over 300 years later! Steve Trafford's new play borrows from the theatre language of the Restoration but, like Brecht, he wants to invite the audience to think anew about who Nell Gwyn might have been and to show how much remains the same for women now as it did in the seventeenth century. (I went to see the movie SUFFRAGETTE recently and was amazed to discover that women in Switzerland didn't get the vote until 1971... Saudi Arabia are still thinking about it!). Steve's also written the play as a comedy (albeit a dark comedy) and wants the audience to have a good laugh!

For an audience to engage with a play, they need to feel for the characters and understand their dilemmas; for them to laugh they must be invited so to do. But are the audience laughing *with* the characters, or *at* the characters? In Steve's play, Nell is 'in a state' right from the outset; she's panicking, upset, angry, frightened... And for good reason.

How best to pitch this high emotion so early on in the action? I decided a bit of good old Stanislavskian/method would help! I empathetically immersed myself in Nell's world, reading everything I could find about her and the world she inhabited. I tried to imagine what living such a life might have felt like, seeking any similar or parallel emotional experiences from my own, to try and access a kind of truth. The comedy of the play comes from the juxtaposition of Nell's emotional intensity with Margery's dry, witty observations. So playing Nell I was free to chart, feel and show her emotional journey from moment to moment through the play and 'go for it!' And what a journey... a rollercoaster! As Margery comments 'She's (Nell) up like a rocket one minute and down like a stick the next!'

Nell Gwyn was an actress and comedienne, a whore and Royal Mistress, a mother, a benefactress and yet totally dependent on the King's pleasure in her. She was a great celebrity in her day, seen as bridging the gap between the London poor and the world of the rich and powerful, as personified by the King. She played so many different roles in her life, and Steve Trafford demands his actress step up to the plate! There are 14 different characterisations presented by Nell within the action of the play; each has to be differentiated, clean and true. The actress playing Nell is required to sing six songs by Henry Purcell, all of which require great vocal dexterity and beauty of tone (Yikes!). Steve has given Nell some wonderfully witty lines (she was renowned for her wit) which need to be delivered with panache and excellent 'timing'. Above all Nell must be 'real' to the audience... a living, breathing person, warts and all.

It is wonderful to return to this role one year on. We first presented the play at York Theatre Royal and on tour. Now, here at The Park, we have the opportunity to reflect, refine and clarify every delicious theatrical moment! Exciting!!!



HENRY PURCELL – THE ENGLISH BAROQUE

Henry Purcell 1659-1695

Henry Purcell, perhaps the greatest of all English composers, was born in Old Pye Street, a notorious slum area of Westminster, London. Beginning his musical career as a chorister, he was soon composing for theatre, the court, creating chamber music pieces, and he also wrote the first British opera 'Dido and Aeneas'. His legacy is the creation of a uniquely English style of Baroque music.

The word 'Baroque' comes from the Portuguese 'barroco' meaning a misshapen pearl, a reference to the overly ornate and ornamented music of the early 16th Century. Purcell enriched that Baroque style with Italian and French influences, to create powerfully expressive tonal music, with brilliant vocal settings. He wrote everything from incidental music, lively dance numbers, passionate arias, to rollicking choruses and comical catches.

His influence on contemporary classical and popular music continues. He was a powerful influence on Benjamin Britten's work; and Pete Townshend of the rock group 'The Who' identified Purcell as a key influence in their 1969 rock opera 'Tommy'.

In all, Purcell was a genius who created profoundly expressive and delightful music that still moves and entertains today.

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