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PRODUCTION REVIEW:
FROM PAGE TO ZOOM WITH LOVE AND MASKS

Hannah COWLEY: *The Belle's Stratagem*. Directed by Gaye Taylor Upchurch, performed by the Red Bull Theatre. Zoom live stream, 22 February 2021.

Sharon Wiseman

CAST

Letitia Hardy | Lilli Cooper

Doricourt | Santino Fontana

Old Hardy | Peter Jay Fernandez

Sir George | Touchwood | Chauncy Thomas

Lady Frances Touchwood | Jasmine Batchelor

Saville | Tony Jenkins

Mrs. Racket | Heather Alicia Simms

Miss Ogle/Kitty Willis | Lauren Karaman

Villers | Neal Bledsoe

Flutter | Aaron Krohn

Courtall | Mark Bedard

Silvertongue, etc. | Cecil Baldwin

HANNAH Cowley's 1780's popular comedy of manners *The Belle's Stratagem* places women and their romantic choices as the central element of the performance. During the discussion with the director Gaye Taylor Upchurch and cast members of the Red Bull Theatre production, the enthusiasm for the Zoom medium of live theatre is evident. The play is a live reading, although Upchurch clarifies that much directorial planning went into her approach, with storyboards and Zoom shaped boxes crafted to enhance the narrative. The play engages with themes of truth and deception, transferring to Zoom from live performance, and the actors inhabit their virtual spaces with enthusiasm. The play's language is witty and accessible; there are interesting interpretations of the familiar dilemmas of love matches set against the backdrop of this modern medium. The narrative is well paced and faces are adorned with masks before true selves are revealed within their separate Zoom spheres, connected and yet oddly separate. Zoom provides us with few distractions from the faces of the actors and their interactions, presented directly to us against the ephemeral backgrounds.

Noticeable is the lack of costume and the relative absence of props, as each actor inhabits a small space on screen with only the odd fan or book appearing for added authenticity and interest. The audience focuses almost exclusively on the faces and facial expressions of the actors, unlike the wider audience of a live production on stage. The Zoom performance offers a curious hybrid between live performance and a small screen adaptation. Actors are caught between the demands of the camera in terms of facial expression and emotion, contrasting with the different requirements of performance in live theatre. We are vividly aware of fleeting expressions, and as noted during the post streaming interview, viewing oneself in the corner of the screen remains distracting and compelling.

Hannah Cowley moved geographically between the country and town, and evidence of this aspect of the narrative is present in the play. The Touchwoods travel to the city, although as a former aficionado, George Touchwood is aware of the possible attractions to be paraded before his young and impressionable bride. Lady Frances requires a charismatic actor to convey the complexities of innocence, naivety and sexual experience of a married woman; not simply a country woman exposed to the dubious attractions of city life. The proliferation of metaphorical images of birds and cages associated with the lives of the women on stage are more striking through Zoom. Conceptually and visually, Lady Frances, for example, inhabits a small box on screen and the Zoom backdrops are indistinct and provide less dramatic impact than scenery on an open stage.

One issue of the medium, despite the skill of some of the actors, is the lack of dramatic potential. Each act carefully signals the scene or actors inhabiting the platform. This presents its own mix of hierarchical representation. The smaller parts move fleetingly across the screen and are often positioned in boxes below those of the central characters. This delivers a clear mode of storytelling, but it also inevitably apportions a level of importance to some characters over others, perhaps to the detriment of some of the smaller yet pivotal roles, such as Flutter, Old Hardy and Seville. Hannah Cowley allows her women to make their own choices however, even if they do so from gilded cages, or in this case, crafted boxes. Lady Frances may be a domesticated wife, but she is a willing one, and she breaks with tradition in appearing in public with her husband rather than without him.

Letitia, like Aphra Behn's Helena in *The Rover* and Shakespeare's Rosalind in *As You Like It*, chooses her own man, even though he has in reality been chosen for her. In Hannah Cowley's play, this is a past inconvenience rather than something unsurmountable. Letitia and Doricourt may be betrothed, but Letitia desires Doricourt's full attention and devotion. It is ironic that to do this she has to become

somehow more and also less than herself. The play advocates disguise with appearances as merely a foil for the individual's particular choices. Lady Frances is not just a young wife in a gilded cage but a woman who genuinely loves her husband. The other characters are aware of this, even if Sir George is not. Doricourt is a man who has seen much yet experiences little, other than a sense of jaded ennui. His first impressions of Letitia are not favorable, as she fails to live up to his expectations based on his previous experiences. Letitia responds by creating personae of her own to bewilder and eventually bewitch her lover. The presence of Mrs. Racket is alternately maternal and sexually voracious throughout. She inhabits her role with a knowing smile and the flick of a fan. Mrs. Racket is the challenging character in the play, a sexually experienced widow, but not controlled within an inherently patriarchal system. She is free to encourage, plot and to advise as she sees fit. Her maternal presence holds the central strands of the plot together and this is reflected, intentionally or not, by her appearance in a box at the centre or at the top of the Zoom platform.

This highlights both the potential and the limitations of Zoom as a platform for live drama. We cannot escape the positioning of the Zoom boxes before us, nor can we see the physical interactions expected from a live performance. The actors are mostly impeccable in their reading of the play, but there are moments when we are left wondering exactly with whom they are conversing, as Zoom poses limitations on physical engagement and verbal interactions, situated as they are as characters in their designated boxes. The lack of physical movement can be frustrating for the audience and possibly for the actors. Only upper bodies are visible, so emphasis on facial expression and the movement of hands are accentuated, but even small facial movements are heightened. One notable instance of replicating action across the medium is the passing of a letter from one Zoom box to another. While this is skilfully done, it is hampered by the blurring effect created by the actions on screen. Asides are at odds within the small setting as the actors fully face the audience and not each other, yet a soliloquy by Seville is clear, direct and impactful for this very reason.

Lady France's town experience would be brought into greater relief if her journey had been more physically realised and visible to the audience. A larger cast with courtesans and servants would have added greater weight and emphasis to Sir George's concerns about his wife's constancy, threatened potentially by the temptations offered by city life. The Zoom medium also prevents the sense of a character built on the physicality of the actors. Letitia works hard with the use of facial expressions and hand mannerisms to convey the varied aspects of her role, but further

possibilities with changes of costume and scenery and a greater sense of physical collaboration would convey some of these nuances of character very effectively. The Zoom backgrounds are often distractingly ephemeral, conveying little more than a vague backdrop. This fails to add much insight to the characters and their actions conveyed in performance. The use of an intermission, however, serves to remind us that we are in fact watching a live performance.

Zoom reduces the audience to solitary observers as the drama unfolds and we are not an engaged part of the dynamics of live drama. Hannah Cowley's play captivates, as she employs deception, various intriguing plots and disguises as well as successfully rejoicing in the fortunes of the united lovers at the end of the play. The Zoom presentation reveals that staging, costume and a sense of physical interaction become powerful parts of building character and adding dynamism to the performance on stage. However, the play's fast paced dialogue is highlighted by the absence of scenery with a contrastingly sharper focus on the faces of the actors. The boxes often move disconcertingly quickly, with no lead in via a stage entrance or dimmed auditorium lights. The movement between Zoom boxes also sets up an interesting internal dialogue with the viewers: who is the leading voice in each scene in proportion to the arrangements of the boxes on screen and who holds the power? Lady Racket is in turn matriarchically powerful, sympathetic, serious and mischievous, and this is achieved through the sense of her presence on screen. The masks work well within the limited parameters of the Zoom frames, simultaneously hiding and revealing the individual characters and their motivations. The doubling of Kitty and Lady Ogle seems to serve no true dramatic purpose other than to accentuate the mischievous similarities between the supposedly high-born woman and the willing courtesan. Letitia's engaging and enigmatic character gradually draws Doricourt inexorably to her, as he is both repelled and enthralled as intended. Costume is minimal but the black tops shared by Doricourt and Saville place them in accord as men searching for their ideal woman. The final section in the last act sees the cast united on screen in their Zoom boxes, displayed before us in a final act of resolution and gaiety, a reworking of the final curtain call at the end of a play.

The impact of the Zoom framing gives us, the lone viewer, immediate access to the words and expressions of the actors as if they are spoken to us, but not it seems, to each other. This is empowering and compelling but also detracts from the relationships between the central characters on screen, notably the courting couples. Doricourt's love for Letitia is expressed directly to us rather than to her, and the rapprochement between George and Frances is successful because we are aware of their established relationship. The backgrounds add some depth to the scenes but do not

convey dramatic weight, nor can they be utilised by the actors. Occasional props are used with some success, notably the kissing of Lady Racket's hands in the first act and the exchange of a paper between Tony and Saville in the third act. Asides to the audience evolve into an open exchange, which adds an unexpected layer of openness and theatricality. Despite the lack of costume and staging, the central issue of disguise and identity remains the focal point of the play. Doricourt is a sophisticated man but ultimately remains the small boy entranced by a young girl to whom he is betrothed. George Touchwood is fearful for his wife's virtue, yet she adopts different masks across various locations and discards them for the one she values the most, that of the country wife. Lady Racket remains unashamedly independent but also switches between alternating facets of her personality. Saville, a foil to the charismatic Doricourt, is rewarded ultimately for his devotion to Lady Frances with a suitable facsimile, the sister of his former beloved.

Letitia has the last words at the end of a play inhabited by strong and decisive women, written by a woman and dedicated to another. Letitia details the happy outcome despite the "marks of softness" worn by the actors and pithily notes that men wear "vizers" too. Acting may inhabit the twilight space between truth, reality and appearance, but Hannah Cowley notes we all wear our own masks and disguises. The city has been reduced to a facsimile of wax in microcosm during the play, fitting to the small screen adaptation offered by the Zoom experience. The medium of Zoom removes many devices employed in stagecraft, but the characters remain vibrant and accessible, ironically perhaps more so as they are viewed privately rather than as a shared social experience. Yet as Letitia notes, we "wear our masks" from youth to old age and on stage perhaps we are no more than what "we appear to be," whether this is in a live theatre production, or as isolated participants in boxes on a Zoom platform.

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