

# THEATER AT MASON NEWSLETTER



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## A Word from the President

### A Look at Restoration Comedy and *The Rover*



This Friends of Theater newsletter edition will focus on the School of Theater's upcoming Mainstage production, *The Rover*, to be presented over two weekends beginning at the end of March. *The Rover* is a Restoration comedy or, as it is often called, a comedy of manners. It premiered in London in 1677 and was written by the first known professional woman playwright, Aphra Behn. See below for the performance dates.

When the School of Theater first announced *The Rover*, I realized that many of us, including myself, knew little about this early form of theater comedy. Therefore, in preparation for our production, I thought that a brief lesson on Restoration comedy would be helpful.

In the eighteen years prior to 1660 public stage performances in England had been banned by the then ruling Puritan-influenced republican governments. When the monarchy was restored in 1660 by theater-loving King Charles II a torrent of English playwriting and performances was unleashed celebrating the end of the repressive Puritan rule.

The greatest achievement of the Restoration theater was in comedy. Restoration comedy is defined by witty, blunt, sexual dialogue, boudoir intrigues, sensual innuendos and rakish behavior. Prologues and epilogues were commonplace and usually delivered in a loud and

hilarious fashion. The play's characters clash with each other in situations of crowded and bustling intrigues and conflicting love entanglements.

Costumes reflected the contemporary dress of the time period where every possible part of the female and male body was adorned in ruffles and ribbons: men wore plumed hats, wigs, and waistcoats and women wore large hat and bell shaped skirts. Common traits of the aristocracy were exaggerated with bows, curtsies, heightened gesticulation, and graceful and elegant patterns of movement.

Also, restoration comedy introduced the first professional actresses who proved a draw for many gentlemen who were eager to see a woman engage in sexual banter on stage.

*The Rover* was an instant success. Aphra Behn's play conformed to the conventions of the time with flirtations, multiple plots lines, and sexual innuendo. At the same time, it is also different in setting and in the forthright character of its heroine, Helena. The setting is not England but Naples, Italy where a group of Englishmen, led by the rakish Willmore, *The Rover*, have come to Carnival seeking a night of love and feasting. Willmore meets his match in Helena, a young Italian noblewomen, who with her friend, Florinda, determine to control their fates through marriage to men of their own choosing. This is not an easy task, in an era where a well-bred woman's choice is usually limited to a nunnery or a family-arranged marriage. Come and see the show to find out if Helena and Florinda achieve their goals!

Sincerely,



Eileen Duggan, President

Friends of Theater at Mason

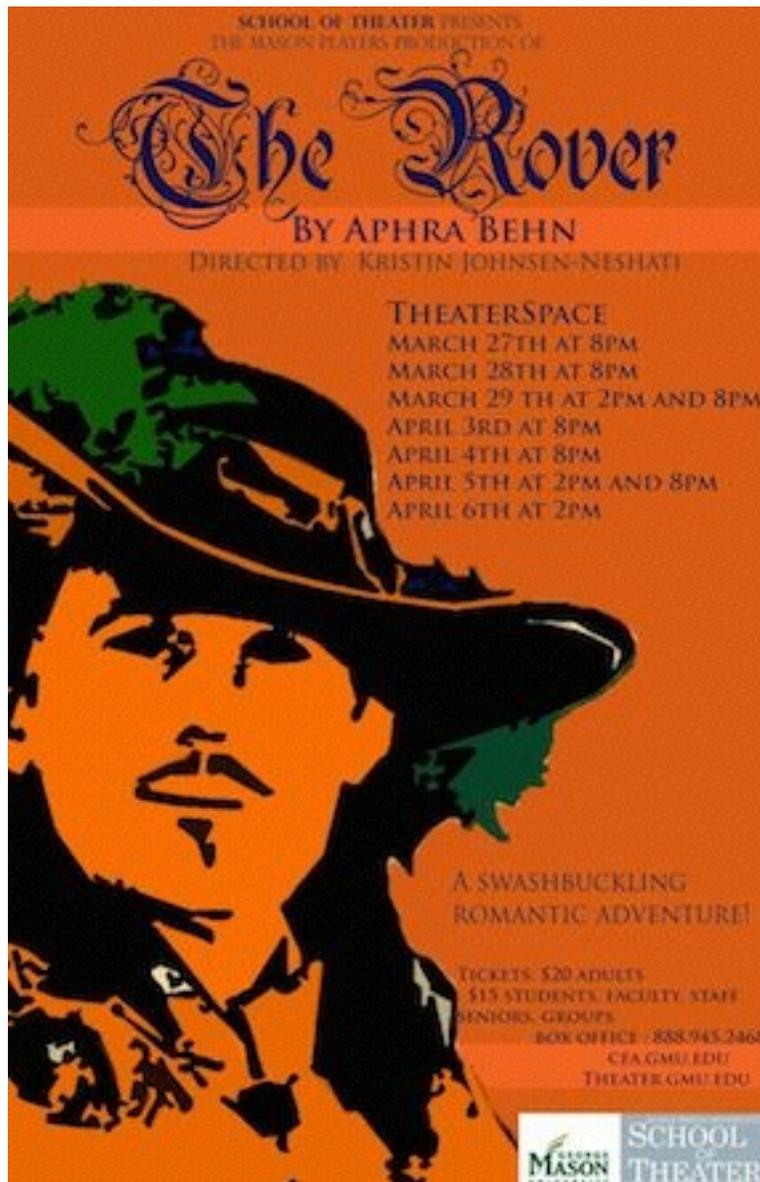
## Coming Soon



## The Rover

Written by Aphra Behn

Directed by Kristin Johnsen-Neshati



## Restoration Comedy set in the season of Carnival!

Sometime spy for Charles II and England's first professional woman playwright, Aphra Behn premiered her topsy-turvy comedy in 1677. Two sisters in Naples must summon their wits and virtue to evade arranged marriage, the convent, and—Heaven forbid! —the Banish'd Cavaliers.

## PERFORMANCES

**March 27-29 & April 3-5 at 8:00 PM**

**March 29 & April 5-6 at 2:00 PM**

**TheaterSpace**

# Visiting the Costume Shop

*The Rover* is a Restoration Comedy with a large cast. Its costumes can only be described as lavish and lush, with lots of them! King Charles II enjoyed and supported theater, providing generous funding for costumes, many of them rich and opulent. Dressing *The Rover* stage requires a staggering forty three costumes.

Mailey Shimon, sophomore Theater major, Friends of Theater scholarship recipient, and the costume designer for *The Rover* invited this Friend for a peek behind the busy doors of the costume shop. As costume designer, Mailey is charged with finding or constructing all needed articles of clothing and accessories for the production.

What an amazing peek it was! The shop is two rooms with a small curtained-off dressing room area for fittings, and it is chock full of tables, sewing machines, ironing boards, rolls and rolls of fabric, thread and trims of every kind, dress forms, and hanging racks of costumes tagged by the character's name and scene worn in the play. The shop is run by School of Theater Costume Manager, Laurel Dunayer, who also makes all the patterns and is ably assisted by interns.

Mailey explained the process of designing and executing the costumes for this colorful show. She began reading the script, collaborating with director Kristin Johnsen-Neshati, selecting a color palette with the stage designers, doing historical research, and making preliminary sketches last fall. She has worked with the play for so long that she addresses the characters by name as if they were next-door neighbors.

The designer has a budget. To stretch it as far as possible, Mailey starts by pulling costumes from stock, pieces from past productions that can be reused, adapted, or even dyed to meet present needs. The School of Theater's stock is bursting at the seams, housed in a location outside the costume shop. A scarf, a vest, or a piece of lace can repurpose a garment. Some items are purchased, but some must be built, that is made from scratch. The internet has been a boon to designers for sources of less expensive materials.

Looking at a gown and a jacket built for two main characters in *The Rover*, I was astounded at the quality and execution of the pieces. There were no shortcuts taken for theatrical use—everything is beautifully executed and finished.

Come to *The Rover* and see these gorgeous creations yourself!



## Stage Combat— It's a Swing and a Miss



Our goal is to provide our students with a strong foundation in theater overall and a significant depth of knowledge in their chosen concentrations. Theater students at Mason gain facility in many marketable skills. Some of those skills go unnoticed until they suddenly emerge to complete that perfect moment of stage magic. Performances are filled with these gems—moments of virtuosic achievement.

Perhaps you noticed an exchange of a grab, shake and fall in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, a large comedic fight in the dream sequence in *Women and Wallace*, and a brutal bar fight in *Woycheck*. Audiences for *The Rover* will thrill to some fancy blade work as swordplay ignites that production. These moments of storytelling demand much of an acting company, as actors must stay “in the moment” while executing some pretty tricky maneuvers. At this time actors are living the life of their character while making another character look strong, dangerous, and, well, highly skilled and/or highly charged. Stage Combat is often part of our production season, and it is part of our curriculum, as well.

Stage Combat is safe and effective storytelling for moments of onstage violence. Any violence on the stage, from small hair pulls to faints and from weapon-heavy melees to the challenges of contemporary interpersonal violence, demands technique, communication, and practice, practice, practice. In the classroom and in the rehearsal hall we first introduce actors to the specifics of physical communication between acting partners. There is no single more important ingredient to believability, service to the play, and an effective moment in the production. As the story progresses through acted violence, scene partners must know what exactly is coming next, be certain that the environment is safe and clear, and that all the actors involved are physically and mentally sound. Once we have a physical vocabulary for making those connections, we next focus on choreographic specificity and the demands of clear and safe targeting. That is, we focus on how to move and where to direct weapons, body parts, and energy in the playing space. Then we apply these skills to the storytelling at hand, and we do that over and over, so that an actor can repeat the necessary steps when the adrenaline is pumping and the audience is reacting.

Hand-to-hand fighting techniques (punches, pulls, pushes, falls and kicks, for instance) are generally the first steps to mastering fighting for the stage. You might imagine, once we place four feet of hardened steel in the actors’ hands, all the same demands of partnering and targeting remain, while the stakes do go up. Of course, when we choreograph for weapons on the stage, we are also teaching a bit of history. How was the broadsword used in battle? How did swordsmanship change with the rapier? And, again, how did it evolve with the shorter sword of the court? Stage Combat is a wide and wonderful world to explore, and, when it is needed in a production, can elicit reactions and engage an audience with thrilling immediacy.

Ken Elston

Director, School of Theater

## Chili Chowdown



A group of Friends of Theater provided a chili lunch for the cast and crew of *Hedda Gabler* during their Saturday tech rehearsal, a tradition enjoyed by Friends and students alike. Tech is a long day of hard work for the company and a mealtime break is welcome.

## An Evening with Director Mark Rydell



The School of Theater hosts a special guest via teleconference on Monday, April 7, at 4:30pm. Director Mark Rydell (*On Golden Pond*, *James Dean*, *The Cowboys*) shares insights to his long career in entertainment, studying at the Actors Studio and directing on Broadway before moving

to helm iconic television series and award-winning feature films. Mr. Rydell will beam in from Beverly Hills for an interactive conversation with our students and our community.

**This event is FREE.**

**No reservations required.**

**April 7, 2014**

**Mason Hall's Atrium & Meese Conference Room**

**4:30 PM**

**Save the Date — May 3rd**

**Theater at Mason  
is part of the City of Fairfax's  
Spotlight on the Arts!**



**Spotlight on Cabaret and Comedy**

**presented by the  
Friends of Theater at Mason  
and  
Spotlight on the Arts**

**Saturday Evening, May 3, 2014!**

**Watch for your invitation!**

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