

A celebration of the wit of women in awkward times

THEATRE

By BERWYN LEWIS

The Wonder, A Woman Keeps a Secret
By Susannah Centlivre
The Rocks Players
Friday, Saturday, 8.00 p.m., Sunday 5.30,
till November 13th.
Director: Beverly Blankenship

THE program tells us that this extraordinary Restoration Comedy was written by Susannah Centlivre and was first performed at Drury Lane in 1714.

Born Susannah Freeman, she left home at 16, joined a troupe of players, briefly attended Cambridge University (until her difference was noted) and then moved on to London, having acquired the skills of fencing, grammar, logic and ethics.

The play is a celebration of women escaping fates worse than death, that is, arranged marriages. It is also a celebration of the bawdy, rollicking physicality of life before the Industrial Revolution, which introduced mechanised divisions of labour, nuclear family economic units and codified morality which banished women to the outskirts of society.

With bouncy and slapstick exuberance this production presents shamelessly pantalooned and high-heeled Lotharios, Lisbon lushes, impudent maids and zany ladies who faint, fence and outscheme their intrigue-bent and rapacious servants.

The costumes, low-budget skeletal style, are ingenious. Flowery codpieces to match their wearers'

promises of love, men in gold boots dangling rapiers at each other as well as cape tossing and wig pulling which reveal green-haired punks lurking just below the surface. Evil looking chamber-pots are as much a part of the scenery as fairy-bread nibbling cupids.

The scenes, which streak along at an insane pace, are sometimes announced by a scrofulous and disdainful ostler, sometimes by quarrelling servants. They feature women in drag, according to the tradition of the time, and highlight the hilarity of gender swaps.

There's the rocky Gibby, played by Glenda McPhee, a Scottish foot-person who delivers fierce streams of Gaelic and spittle. And there's Colonel Briton, played by Barbara Watt, who wins the hand of Isabella (Julie Dunsmore). Despite their differences in height they undoubtedly live happily ever after or long enough to discover that they are both the same sex.

Laurel McGowan plays a bespectacled and selectively dotty, Violante. She executes a dazzling double act which saves her from a convent, juggles lover and father and secures her own and Isabella's marriages of their choice.

The production is a slap in the face for starchy, puritanical, didactic theatre. Its willing and witty sex objects leap in and out of each others' bedchambers with zest and delight. Sincerity is dispensable, fun is penultimate, love, jealousy and villains are the currency, passion is on tap and runs hot and cold according to the intelligence of its dispenser.

Feminocrats could learn a few tricks from these whorishly modern wenches.

SMH 19/10/1982