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THEATER BY RACHAEL CARNES

ALL THAT LEARNING EVER WRIT

UO Theatre dives into the Restoration with *The Emperor of the Moon*

Slamming doors, pretending to be statues, hiding under tables: These theatrical devices are as old as theater itself, and they're in great supply in J.K. Rogers' directorial debut *The Emperor of the Moon*, playing now at the University Theatre.

Playwright Aphra Behn (1640-1689) is considered to be England's first female professional writer. She was a poet for hire, a translator — maybe a spy? — and in a period when theaters were just reawakening after puritanical laws had shuttered them (thanks, 17th-century Reformed Protestants), Behn's plays poked fun at the distressing lives of rich people.

Audiences seeing *The Emperor of the Moon* when it premiered in 1687 would have well recognized the writer's thinly veiled allusions to the playboy court of Charles II. Billed as a mini-spectacle, shows like this were chock full of topical references to be lapped up by an audience that included the same characters presented onstage: the aristocracy, their servants and the middling professional class.

Behn cached her critique within the ribald and familiar characters of *Commedia dell'arte*, an Italian form that was well loved and well used for centuries. (If you've ever chuckled at someone slipping on a banana peel, thank *Commedia*.)

Shelbi Wilkin's costumes for this production are delightful: masterfully constructed and impeccably detailed. The set, too, by Jerry S. Hooker, is a rich fantasy. Lighting designer Kat Matthews

offers shifts in mood, with lively projections. (One quibble: There's a pocket of darkness downstage right that too many actors perform in.) Sound by Bradley Branam flows seamlessly.

Performances are varied, though everyone gives 100 percent.

Sam Brignell as Don Cinthio and Simon Griffin as Don Charmante have a stoic, foppish air. Lily Smith as Bellemante captures attention as the classic ingénue, and her counterpart, Samantha Lee as Elaria, matches her in conviction, though her delivery seems a little flat.

Mackenzie Utz as Harlequin gains momentum as the play rolls along. Aimee Hamilton as Doctor Baliardo plays it straight, to great comic effect — the only character to consistently do so — and Connor French as Scaramouch and Nicolette Zaretsky as Mopsophil punch up the energy in every scene.

Director Rogers makes the choice to fiddle with the script, adding early simulcast translation for modern audiences and peppering the production

with anachronisms. But it's unclear whether these diversions add much.

The production is strongest when the characters onstage take what they're saying with deadly seriousness while simultaneously embodying broad, outré physicality. Within that approach, this comedy of manners twinkles like the stars.

The Emperor of the Moon continues through Feb. 5 at University Theatre; \$8-\$10, tickets available at tickets.uoregon.edu, or by calling the box office at 541-346-4363.

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CLASSIFIEDS

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