

# **DRAMA** *Works*

**Plays Through Practice**

**PLAYHOUSE CREATURES**

by

**APRIL DE ANGELIS**

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**EXTRACT**

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# Extract

## BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF THE PLOT

The play is set in around 1670, in the earlier part of the Restoration period, just before it starts to become a more respectable means of employment for a woman. These actresses, then, are the pioneers, fighting for their careers and a genuine status as artists equal with the male actors who have already achieved that distinction.

The story follows Nell Gwynne from the moment when she first hears that the new theatre wants actresses to the end of her career and her choice to accept the beneficence of the King, as his mistress. This simple plotline is enriched by the stories of three other actresses who, in contrast to Nell, all fail to gain the respect of men, even though there is a wonderful moment when they are allowed to be equal shareholders in the company. All three of the others have to leave their chosen careers. Only Nell chooses to leave.

The play is set in a framework of 'the nether region,' a kind of no-man's land, perhaps hell, perhaps limbo. This is also set in a theatre - derelict and haunted by the ghosts of these early actresses.

The play has a strong feminist message, a cry for equality, as raised by these early pioneers, which is designed to question our place as women even in today's seemingly equal world.

## WORKING THROUGH THE PLAY IN A PRACTICAL WAY

### Preliminary Practical Work

Before beginning work on the text of the play, try some of the following exercises which give a brief taster of the style of the Restoration theatre.

1. Concentrate on good deportment. Actors in these plays held themselves very straight and moved with grace - unless playing a comic character. The clothes of the time enhance that feeling of grace. Scatter chairs around the room, to sit on later, and move around the room, holding yourself straight and the head held high. On a hand-clap, sit and freeze in an attractive and graceful pose. Then get up gracefully on another handclap. This time, acknowledge the people you pass with a graceful inclination of the head.

You can try this also with fans, or pieces of paper held as a fan. The fan extends the grace of the hand and can express much.

Now try using your 'fan' to express: flirtatiousness, shyness, anger, playfulness, deceit.

2. Set two chairs, angled slightly, but facing each other. In pairs enter, one from each side of the performance space. Acknowledge each other as you approach as friends and sit down. Then try the same manoeuvre, but this time you do not like each other. You will remain polite but your body language will show your dislike by a certain rigidity of pose and expression.

Try the same as above, but standing instead of sitting.

3. Make solo exaggerated poses to express shock, amazement, disbelief, happiness, sadness, flirtatiousness, anger. In each case make sure that you are not 'modern' in your style, but always aware of the attractive placement of your arms, heads and upper torso.

4. The language of polite insincerity: in pairs, have a conversation in which two people seem to be very polite to each other but are actually being completely insincere.

4. Asides. There is an exercise in its place in the body of the work that follows on this subject, but you could try this exercise for starters:

Enter in pairs from opposite sides. As you see each other flip the head to the audience and communicate out front what you think about the other person. e.g. 'I see so-and-so. How I detest her.' Then greet the other using direct speech: 'Hello, dear Miranda. How well you do look.' The latter line is obviously insincere.

Make sure that two distinct voice tones are used for direct speech to each other and for the asides. Carry on the scene a little, using as many asides as possible. The other person is as if blind - she cannot see or hear the aside taking place. Keep hold of the facial expression used for the last line spoken whilst your partner delivers her aside.

Before starting the practical work that follows, it is assumed that all students will have read the play and will have some idea of the plot and the characters.

If there hasn't been time to read the whole thing, then at least it is a good idea to have them read the brief introduction to Restoration theatre, which precedes this section, as well as the plot synopsis and the character sketches.

As the group works through the play in a practical way, make sure that they all keep accurate records of any decisions made and of the exercises themselves. They should realise that decisions made are not set in stone and will need adjustment, especially when the work-through of the text is completed. Otherwise characters and settings will not be consistent.

## PROLOGUE

The Prologue introduces us to Doll Common. Her name is not that of a real historical figure but of a character in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*. In Jonson's play, Doll Common, a prostitute with a great deal of sharp wit and native cleverness, is one of the tricksters who set out to 'gull', or con greedy men out of their money. But the name has other resonances: Doll was a common name for a prostitute and 'Common' gives us the idea that the character is a kind of Everyman figure.

In a way, Doll Common is the spirit of the Restoration theatre itself, raised out of the ashes of the time pre-Cromwell and pre-Puritanism when this playhouse was a bear pit, or so she says, showing us the jostling vibrant new life of the early part of the Restoration period.

Jonson himself, whose character Doll Common is, enjoys making fun of the Puritans [as does Shakespeare through such characters as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*]. In fact, by using the name Doll Common for the narrator of the play, De Angelis brings many Jonsonian echoes to play. In many ways, Jonson is the pre-figurer of the best of Restoration comedy. Both Jonson's plays and Restoration comedy 'hold a mirror up to Nature' and satirise the follies of mankind. Jonson's canvas is somewhat larger, as the audience for his plays covered a broader span of humanity, from the upper classes right down to the apprentice in the street. The Restoration theatre, in contrast, was largely the playground of the Court and the upper middle-classes, a relatively small audience, and so its plays satirise the upper classes and their morals. But the motivation is the same and it is fitting that Doll Common, herself an adept in *The Alchemist* at showing up the hypocrisies of those she dupes, should be a character that links the two play-going eras.

Though Doll Common in both *Playhouse Creatures* and *The Alchemist* is not an actress herself, in Jonson's play she plays many parts, changing her outward character often, the better to cheat her victims. Thus, she is in effect an 'actress', someone who pretends to be many different people from many differing ranks. This gives De Angelis's character a further resonance: she is, through her namesake, a consummate actress also and has played many roles in her life, from the child whose father trained the bears, to the Prostitute of her younger years, to the theatre dresser in charge of Mrs Betterton's wardrobe. She also takes on small roles in the plays themselves. She is another reminder of the precariousness of existence for these women who build their lives around the playhouse.

As narrator, many of the messages of the play are conveyed through Doll Common, so her character is very important. Most of these themes are introduced in this first speech of hers:

- the 'gentlemen' who, despite their fine rank, are like bears, with their fetid smell and their bestial behaviour
- the actresses, who like the bears are asked to perform for those same gentlemen's pleasure and who, like bears, have to lick their wounds afterwards on their own
- the battle of the women to establish themselves on a par with male actors is presaged in the idea of the bears preferring the fighting to the dancing
- the courage of these women, alone in an unpitying and chauvinist world is hinted at
- the whole idea of fact and fiction - the real lives of the characters versus the roles they play - the inner suffering versus the outward show.

Doll Common is described as 'sixty or so' and then as 'timeless'. She seems not to change ages throughout the play, although here in the first speech she is in the playhouse after it has been closed and from Scene 3 we are back in time to the theatre's heyday. Her changelessness emphasises her Everywoman quality, giving her a knowingness not granted to the others, who are chained in their own lives and in their time. Only Nellie approaches something like this timeless quality, perhaps through her fame. Of course, both Doll and Nell are the only two characters we see as ghosts - dead - which adds to their timeless feel.

Read through the speech carefully noting the sounds of the consonants in particular, and the brevity of the vowels. What phrases stand out?

'It is a fact.'

'like a sick cat.'

bears love to dance they hate to do it for a whip.

'blood was spilt and death faced...'

The words used are predominantly monosyllabic and many of them have hard, sharp consonants. At the same time, it is not easy to speak the speech fast. All those 'c' sounds slow the speaker up - if you are going to give them the value they need.

**Divide the speech up within the group and listen carefully to each other, investigating the impression the sounds of the speech make.** [If possible, keep to the London accent I feel sure that Doll should have.] Do these sounds help build a physical idea of Doll's character? What is the impression of Doll they suggest?

Of course, one can play with these sounds further and create different effects with them.

**Try the first three lines, before the pause:**

**bitterly, using the words to make abrupt spitting sounds humorously, playing with the audience...I'm not going to tell you how old I am' and with an arch suggestiveness about 'the how was in that old eternal way'.**

**as if groping around in a misty world where reality and 'facts' are now illusive. Try this idea first as if she were a vagrant fumbling through an alcoholic haze and second as if she is trying to remember through the mists of forgetfulness created by the vagaries of long old age and failing memory**

**What different ideas of Doll do we get from these different approaches? Which do you prefer?**

**What is happening in the pause? Try her:**

**moving from her position in front of the fire towards the audience, as if sharing a secret with them - or a surprising piece of knowledge**

**looking and moving vaguely around her as if becoming only gradually aware of where she is**

**matter-of-factly - she is about to relate more facts - so nodding to herself, sitting back, or crossing arms - something that indicates someone who is divulging 'history'. For this you would need a chair or stool [probably the latter].**

**Would the scene be helped by a piece of furniture other than the fire**

**- or hindered?**

**Which of these approaches best fits your growing idea of Doll?**

Though there is a raunchy jokiness to her relation of the fact that the men in the audience smelled as rank as the bears, the main tone of the rest of the speech is thought-provoking. She is conjuring up the ghosts of the past for us, both bears and players and the link is made between the suffering of the creatures and of the actresses, also 'creatures' made to perform for the avid eyes of men.

**Has this work on the speech helped you see Doll more physically? Try her now as she enters at the beginning of the Prologue:**

**hunched, shuffling, a real 'vagrant' in the way she moves, her movement grotesque, ugly**

**more dreamy, like someone lost - but still with the groping gait of the old who find it difficult to remember where things are stump on, her movements definite, still strong, but defined by anger**

**as above, but defined this time by good -humour - the sort of old woman who loves a yarn and a joke**

**How do each of these attitudes alter an audience view of Doll? Which do you think works best?**



**Now work through the movement of the speech. As she begins to remember more, would you have Doll's movement changing? Try:  
starting angrily, or good-humouredly, and becoming more wistful,  
sorrowful  
starting old and vague, or in an alcoholic haze, then straightening,  
becoming younger as she goes back into the past.**

**There may be other permutations you can try. Which seems to work best?**

**Try the whole speech now, putting everything together. Identify where you are beginning to change posture or tone of voice. For those who are not watchers of Eastenders or situated in the South-east, keep working at that accent!**

Discuss what you want to suggest by this scene. Is Doll:  
in a kind of chamber of Hell or the 'nether region' as De Angelis calls it in the last scene- and as Nell suggests in the next scene  
a more vague place of the dead  
simply in the burnt-out ruin of the theatre

Your decision here will have huge implications as to how you present the play. There is no doubt that what we are seeing is the 'ghostly past' of the playhouse - but not just one playhouse. Towards the end of the play we move from the Theatre Royal to the Duke's Playhouse, the Theatre Royal having burnt down and its replacement at Drury Lane not having been yet completed. Thus, this is more an evocation of an era - the ghost of the early Restoration period, and most specifically, the very first few years of the licence for actresses to perform on stage. Later Restoration actresses are treated with far more respect, sometimes even with something akin to adulation - such as Mrs Bracegirdle, who lay in state in Westminster Abbey when she died of cancer.

How grim you make your setting will colour the rest of the play. If this is a portrait of hell then you are emphasising the ghastly underside of the actresses' lives: dwelling on the short journey from prostitute on the street to actress and back; the insecurity of even such as Mrs Betterton's position, and so on. If you want to show the froth and fun that is also written into the play, then some hint of the colour and noise of the era needs to be allowed into your design.

This is a good point then in which to consider the performance space. All practical work should take place in an approximation of that space, so far as possible. The main settings are the stage, the 'tiring room' - which is the women's dressing room - and the street outside. In addition, there is a 'nether region' in which the Prologue, Scene 1 and the last scene in the play are set.

It is clear that De Angelis wants us to get as much of a flavour of the time as possible, without overpowering the play with unnecessary clutter. Scene changes must be quick.

First of all, discuss the needs of the play, paying consideration to what we know from the text. One could do the production very minimalistically, on an almost empty stage. Or it could be far more elaborate. Discuss the pros and cons of both these ideas.

Now consider specifically the implications of the Prologue.

It is clear that De Angelis is not setting this ghostly 'theatre' at any particular one of the two early Restoration theatres: the Duke's Theatre, or the Theatre Royal. The theatre of the Prologue is a kind of generic location which could be either of these but is not specifically one or the other. De Angelis does this a lot with both character and place. It is clear that what she wants is to create an atmosphere of what it was like in these early theatres as well as identifying the different challenges the early actresses faced through a mix of 'real' historical characters, such as Nell Gwynne, Rebecca Marshall and Mrs

Betterton, and fictional ones such as Mrs Farley and Doll Common. Dates too are not always accurate. Rebecca Marshall, according to her dates, would have been about thirteen in 1670, for instance. All the evidence points to a wish to present a feel for the times, if necessary bending known facts a little to suit the purpose. The resulting mix of fact and fiction allows us to focus on certain themes concerning the struggles of women for recognition and respect, both then and in a wider context.

Though it is clear that the Prologue is set in some kind of ghostly nether region, Doll Common pulls back the veil of time and transports us from the ghostly derelict place to the place as it was in its heyday. This allows the designer plenty of licence.

**Divide the class into small groups. Each group has a task of coming up with a setting that allows for the four areas: ghostly theatre, street, tiring room and stage and will move easily from one setting to another.**

**They should consider all of the following:**

**Different composite settings. Could the street, the stage and the 'ghostly' theatre be the same space, for instance?**

**The 'tiring-room' is the most used location and probably the most cluttered. It is here that a lot of the action involving chairs, costumes and props is set. What problems does this have for the design? How would they solve these? Consider the use of gauzes or similar, both to give a ghostly feel to the place and to conceal until used the props and furnishings of the tiring-room.**

**How important is it that the feel of an actual period theatre is created? Would much of the difficulty of setting be solved by having an apron or small forestage? Could you have the main stage as the tiring-room then?**

**This is a play that could be done anywhere. In your discussion of the type of stage you would like to use, consider how well this play could be done in a completely minimalistic way, using the same area for everywhere, bringing on props etc where necessary and changing the mood and location merely by lighting. Or just, 'poor theatre' style, by the acting. If you look at the lighting cues at the end of the play, it is clear that De Angelis does not consider it necessary to change atmosphere by lighting except on the very rarest occasions. The lighting plot states simply 'Overall general lighting' for nearly every scene. Clearly then, as in a Shakespeare play, or in the Restoration theatre itself, where lights were very basic candles and could not be altered in any way, setting, location, atmosphere - all can be achieved by the actors and their skills alone.**

Despite De Angelis's directions and the effects listed at the end of the text, directors have a free rein always in their decisions, A full discussion before making any decisions is essential, as is full justification for all decisions made, in terms of how well the play is served.

Having made some decisions, and bearing in mind that nothing is set in stone, and ideas may clarify as you work through the play, record the decisions so far made. Then set up your rehearsal space - at least with chairs, or masking tape, standing in for whatever entrances and exits you have decided on - plus blocks or chairs used for any items of furniture you have agreed about. You may find you want to add to the latter as you go. Or take things away. This space should be set up for every session you spend on the play.

Be aware of how important everything becomes if you are doing the play completely minimistically. An item of furnishing gains a resonance it might otherwise not have. For instance, if you use a stool for Doll, immediately you have a sense of place. A stool tells us we are indoors. If Doll has no stool, then the fire gains prominence and can be anywhere - the location becomes vaster - could be a street-vagrant's fire somewhere in the street - or in hell itself. Discuss the implications of this comment in the light of the