

**Eyre, Richard (dir.) 2004: *Stage Beauty***  
Directed by Richard Eyre. Screenplay by Jeffrey Hatcher  
Performed by Billy Crudup and Claire Danes. Lions Gate Films

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Richard Eyre's *Stage Beauty* (2004) seems to have been conceived as a sequel of sorts to *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). Like its predecessor, this is a period romance set against the background of the theatre world or, rather, of a world which is spellbound by the magic of the theatre. The action moves ahead in time to the Restoration, but the similarities are obvious: in both cases the male protagonist suffers from creative block (writer's then, actor's now), and can only be reconciled to his art through the inspiration provided by a woman who is struck both with admiration for his talent, and with a passion for the stage. There are even some shots that look strikingly similar: *Stage Beauty* opens as a performance of *Othello* is concluding, and we see Maria (Claire Danes) in the wings silently mouthing the words of Desdemona, exactly as Viola (Gwyneth Paltrow) does with the famous Sylvia speech during the court performance of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in the Shakespeare film.

*Stage Beauty* is set in the early Restoration period (at least in theory, since the film seems to take the years 1660-1700 as one timeless historical moment). As Charles II reopens the theatres, which had been closed during the Puritan Interregnum, young men continue to play female roles; but a couple of months later the king issues a proclamation permitting women to act, and a revolution begins on the stage. The film focuses on the most famous of actors who impersonated women in the early 1660s, Ned Kynaston; the title is, in fact, taken from the comments of prompter John Downes on this player: "he being then very Young made a *Compleat Female Stage Beauty*, performing his Parts so well ... that it has since been Disputable among the Judicious, whether any Woman that succeeded him so Sensibly touch'd the Audience as he" (19). *Compleat Female Stage Beauty* was indeed the full title of the original play by Jeffrey Hatcher on which the script is based and, as it suggests, the film (like the play) is as much about gender issues as

it is about backstage intrigue. As actor Hugh Bonneville allegedly says in the production notes, this is “a period piece with a gender-bender agenda.”

Gender issues have certainly been brought to the foreground. The film plays up the homosexual associations that often fall to the lot of the female impersonator, and gives Kynaston a liaison with the Duke of Buckingham. There is also a vague feminist slant: the advent of the actress is presented as a female conquest, one more step in the struggle for equality. Women – led by Kynaston’s dresser Maria and the king’s mistress Nell Gwyn – claim and gain not only the right to act, but also the right to represent themselves on the stage instead of being represented by men. But the emergence of the actress means the downfall of actors like Kynaston; he loses both his parts and his lover and, as he does not know how to play men, he loses his profession as well. He is then presented as a sexually confused individual, who cannot fully come to terms with his identity as a man on or off the stage. Until he does, he will not be able to act again.

Billy Crudup is good in the almost impossible task of playing the sexually troubled “stage beauty.” His graceful gestures and coquettish smiles when he is in petticoats bear witness to his talent and discipline as an actor. But all his charm and art cannot disguise the fundamental falsehood at the centre of the film. The Kynaston who played female parts in 1660 was seventeen; Crudup is thirty-six, and his Desdemona inevitably has a tinge of the drag-queen. But the hero’s age is not the only crucial point on which this ad-hoc biopic wholly re-invents its subject: the actor’s crisis of identity is also something that rings essentially false. Young Kynaston certainly knew how to play men, and from the beginning of his career was equally acclaimed when he appeared in male guise. As early as January 1661, Samuel Pepys wrote of Kynaston’s performance in Jonson’s *The Silent Woman*:

Among other things here, Kinaston the boy had the good turn to appear in three shapes: 1, as a poor woman in ordinary clothes ... then in fine clothes as a gallant, and in them was clearly the prettiest woman in the whole house – and lastly, as a man; and then likewise did appear the handsomest man in the house. (*Diary* 7/1/1661)

To give this largely concocted story some semblance of historical truth, director Richard Eyre has wrapped it up in a package that is sparkling and bright in many ways: costumes are superb, and settings are convincing enough. Characterization is sometimes uncannily good: Rupert Everett as Charles II and Hugh Bonneville as diarist Samuel Pepys are particularly outstanding (even though Everett has a tendency to overact): they almost seem to have stepped out of the pictures in the National Portrait Gallery. Tom Wilkinson as actor and theatre-manager Thomas Betterton is a solid presence, if slightly old for the role. Buckingham, portrayed as the arch-seducer, is well served by a handsome, knowing-looking Ben Chaplin, who is about the same age the Duke was at the Restoration. But Sir Charles Sedley, who was barely twenty-one in 1660 and was one of the brightest stars of King Charles's court, is a sad disappointment. Sedley is here cast as the villain of the piece, and his charm is accordingly downplayed: he is incorporated by an actor in his late fifties (Richard Griffiths), excessively fat, and turned into a ridiculous fop; the absurdly elaborate wigs he wears make him look very much like a wedding-cake extravaganza.

The characterization of Sedley is just one of many examples of the film's tampering with historical data. Anachronisms and inaccuracies loom large in *Stage Beauty*. Many of them may seem minor details, like assuming that performances at the theatre began at eight in the evening (instead of three), that different actors might rival each other in playing the same role, that Elizabeth Barry or Anne Bracegirdle began their careers in the 1660s (Barry began in the mid 70s, Bracegirdle in the late 80s), or that Kynaston ever acted Othello (he was Cassio in the King's Company productions). It is also inaccurate to present Kynaston and Betterton sharing the stage in the early 1660s; they did, in fact, belong to the same troupe (John Rhodes's) for a very brief period before the formation of the patent companies, but by October 1660 Kynaston had joined the King's, and Betterton the Duke's. Yet all this is to a large extent unimportant; as any director would claim, period films cannot be kept prisoners of the historical record, and some licences – like the placing of Betterton in the same company with Kynaston – may make sense: the leading man in the King's company, Charles Hart, is a more shadowy figure nowadays, and the author and director probably thought their subject was obscure enough to do away with any of the few names that might sound familiar. Even the presentation of Nell Gwyn first as royal mistress and only later as

aspiring actress might serve some purpose in the plot. Yet some other manipulations remain baffling, like making the Duke of Buckingham marry someone called Jane Bellamy (he had married Mary Fairfax in 1657, in a notoriously opportunist move to recover his confiscated estates).

The liberties taken in the recreation of the period mark a clear difference between *Stage Beauty* and its model *Shakespeare in Love*. *Shakespeare in Love* indulges in manipulations of chronology that range from the structural detail (pushing *Romeo and Juliet* back in time a couple of years so that Shakespeare's rival Marlowe can still be alive), to the brazen, playful anachronism (like the souvenir mug from Stratford). It is this latter sort that is especially interesting. That screenwriters and director can send Shakespeare to the shrink for a session in psychoanalysis, or make him shout "Follow that boat!" on the Thames, in the best tradition of action movies, are a good proof of the self-confidence the film exudes. Anachronisms in *Shakespeare in Love* are uproarious fun. In *Stage Beauty*, however, they more often seem makeshift devices patched up to cover some deficiency. The film's representation of Restoration acting styles is a good case in point. As Eyre explains in the production notes, he and his team invented Kynaston's acting style as a woman drawing on a catalogue of hand movements in a book on Elizabethan acting, and seeking further inspiration in the tradition of kabuki theatre (which makes the scene in which Kynaston rehearses resemble a Tai Chi session). But the biggest surprise comes at the end, when Kynaston finally triumphs in the part of Othello with a naturalistic style of acting that seems learned at the Actors' Studio. As Eyre himself concedes, "this is a flight of fancy." Indeed it is; but the necessity for it was created when the author artificially boosted the hero's crisis, adding to his sexual confusion the inability to shift from female to male roles.

The insecurity betrayed by its treatment of anachronism permeates the film at deeper levels. Although it does have its occasional flashes of brightness, *Stage Beauty* remains an essentially flawed piece, both in its sexual politics and in its recreation of the period. For a film that attempts to problematize gender roles and to present the advent of the actress as a form of female empowerment, it comes a little bit too close to offering a rather reactionary message. Although Hatcher has claimed in interviews that he did not intend anything of the sort, as Kynaston moves from the arms of the sly and selfish Duke of Buckingham to those of the devoted

Maria, *Stage Beauty* seems to suggest that homosexuality is no more than a temporary personality disorder that can be cured by the love of a pure woman; no wonder that critic Gregory Weinkauf has defined the movie as “an absolute fag-hag fiesta.” It also suggests – in the final scene in which the hero resorts to Method-style acting and almost kills Desdemona on stage – that male identity can be best asserted by brutalizing women. The film is no subtler on the issue of women’s struggle for equality, despite its thin feminist veneer. Actresses only begin to gain ground when Charles II takes an “affirmative action” measure prohibiting men from playing female roles. But this proclamation is coaxed out of the king after his mistress “pretty witty Nell” gives him a private performance in bed that sends both the monarch and his whole pack of spaniels howling. There is, it seems, only one certain way for women to advance their claims.

As for the reconstruction of the period, the film’s failings are paradigmatic of what the problem is with the Restoration. In a piece published in *The Guardian* shortly before the picture was released, Eyre acknowledged that he was not familiar with the Restoration theatre. He clearly did not bother to learn, or did not trust the audience to take a greater interest in the period than he does. It is revealing that none of the dramatic material introduced or mentioned in *Stage Beauty* belongs to Restoration productions. The play being performed is *Othello*, and all other works mentioned, all other roles, are also Shakespeare’s: Kynaston, we are told, was famous not only as Desdemona, but also as Juliet, Ophelia, and “the one with no hands” (presumably Lavinia, in *Titus Andronicus*); he also played Rosalind in *As You Like It*. As for the emerging actresses, there are allusions to Mrs Corbett acting in *Romeo and Juliet*, Mrs Bracegirdle in *Twelfth Night*, Mrs Barry in *Hamlet*, and Mrs Hughes in *Lear*. As far as we know, neither Kynaston nor any of these actresses ever played the parts they are credited with in the film. But that is probably beside the point. We might have expected to hear the names of these actresses associated with the works of Dryden, Wycherley, Otway or Congreve, but there is no such thing. In a film that supposedly celebrates the world of Restoration theatre, Restoration drama simply does not exist; neither do Fletcher or Jonson. It is all, once more, about Shakespeare.

*Stage Beauty* has clearly drawn its inspiration from *Shakespeare in Love* – one might even be tempted to say that it

should like to be *Shakespeare in Love* – but this is a very different product. It lacks the rhythm and narrative pace of the other film, its rollicking good humour, and a screenplay by Tom Stoppard. *Shakespeare in Love* makes light of its subject and turns Shakespeare's writer's block, his rivalry with Marlowe and even his crossed love for Rosaline into rip-roaring farce. *Stage Beauty* makes everything more serious – the hero's identity crisis is something we cannot laugh off easily – and turns similar material into melodrama. Throughout the film, Charles II asks the actors to make their shows "more jolly." Eyre, apparently, has not heard. *Stage Beauty* may be many things but, sadly enough, it is not the film to show anyone that Restoration drama is immensely good fun.

#### References

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