Review of George Farquhar’s The Beaux’ Stratagem, by The Stratford Festival, directed by Antoni Cimolino, Festival Theatre, Stratford, ON, July 31-October 11, 2014.

Restoration comedy has returned triumphantly to The Stratford Festival, North America’s largest classical repertory theatre. George Farquhar’s The Beaux’ Stratagem, staged during the 2014 season, is the first Restoration drama produced in nearly twenty years by the company since The Country Wife (1995), and the first “long eighteenth-century” British comedy since its mounting of The School for Scandal (1999). The location and timing of this dramatic comeback could not have been better.

The Beaux’ Stratagem was performed at the company’s largest venue, the Festival Theatre, a playhouse featuring corridors lined with prints from Clockwise from top: Colm Feore (as Archer), Martha Henry (as Lady Bountiful), Mike Shara (as Aimwell), Bethany Jillard (as Dorinda), and Lucy Peacock (as Mrs. Sullen) in the Stratford Festival production of George Farquhar’s The Beaux’ Stratagem. Photography by Don Dixon. Digital Artist: Krista Dodson.
John Bell’s *British Theatre* (21 vols., 1776-78, 1780-81), which depict contemporary actors and actresses in memorable scenes from popular plays. Such décor recognizes the rich legacy of eighteenth-century British theatre, and it is appropriate that the boards of that same playhouse do so as well. It is also fitting that *The Beaux’ Stratagem* was performed at the Stratford Festival during the buildup to and wake of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. While the director, Antoni Cimolino, may not have had this political event in mind during his superintendence of the play, those familiar with British history will remember *The Beaux’ Stratagem*’s 1707 debut as the same year of the Union with England Act, which resulted in the formation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain. In fact, upon its initial opening at The Queen’s Theatre (now Her Majesty’s Theatre, Haymarket), *The Beaux’ Stratagem* featured a prologue acknowledging this momentous event:

When thro’ Great Britain’s fair extensive Round,  
The Trumps of Fame, the Notes of Union sound;  
When Anna’s Scepter points the Laws their Course,  
And Her Example gives her Precepts Force:  
There scarce is room for Satyr, all our Lays  
Must be, or Songs of Triumph, or of Praise: (Prologue, ll. 7-12)

Three hundred and seven years later, Scotland has decided, once again, in favor of unification with England, though not without a reinvigorated consciousness about the possible consequences, both positive and negative, of doing so. *The Beaux’ Stratagem* is a drama that similarly concerns the costs and benefits of union, and while union in the play takes the form of marriage and is presented through the medium of comedy, it is nonetheless fraught—economically, socially, and politically.

The drama opens with the bustling arrival of the rakish Aimwell (Mike Shara) and Archer (Colm Feore) to the village of Lichfield. After settling into their temporary abode, an inn operated by Boniface (Robert King) and his daughter Cherry (Sara Farb), audiences soon learn that despite appearances, the two men have descended upon the country town near penniless after having dissipated their money on London pleasures. But all is not lost; with ingenuity in abundance, they have engineered a clever plan—a stratagem. Aimwell is to pose as a lord and Archer to pose as his servant so that the former might win the affections of a rich woman. These are roles that the men intend to adopt alternately in a number of successive locales. One plays the gentleman, the other his attendant, and both men, they hope, will come out ahead. As the drama unfolds, their scheme
appears to augur success, and as it so happens, in Lichfield alone. The heiress Dorinda (Bethany Jillard) falls for Aimwell’s performance at church as the lovestruck gentleman, and Archer betrays his gentility by wooing the wealthy Mrs. Sullen (Lucy Peacock) with elegant compliments and witty turns of phrase that make it difficult for her to remember that she is attached to the feckless and intemperate Squire Sullen (Scott Wentworth).

But in order for a man to obtain a woman’s riches, he must marry her. While doing so may seem a fairly straightforward affair in the case of the unattached lovers Aimwell and Dorinda, matters prove to be much more complicated for Archer and the wedlock-bound Mrs. Sullen, whose married name suggests her conjugal state of affairs: while her husband secured a £10,000 fortune in his bride, their union has produced no heir, and she has received over the course of fourteen months only darkness and gloom in return. The drama thus reveals that while unions can often appear mutually beneficial, those made solely in the name of economic gain or financial legacy and without attention to overall compatibility can come at the expense of individual and social welfare.

In the Stratford production, the actress Lucy Peacock maneuvered adroitly between scenes where Mrs. Sullen expresses her joy in watching Dorinda’s growing romance with Aimwell and sadness in contemplating her own fate. “Can radical Hatreds ever be reconciled?”, she sorrowfully asks (3.3). Through careful physical and vocal pacing, Peacock sympathetically rendered Mrs. Sullen’s fierce sense of injustice over her culture’s blindness to marital strife. In her poetic speech at the close of act 3, which juxtaposes an understanding of marriage as a heavenly-ordained and mutually-beneficial institution against mankind’s debased implementation of it, Peacock entered a spotlight at center stage, slowed her cadence, and recited lines that comprise the argumentative axis around which the drama turns:

> Wedlock we own ordain’d by Heaven’s Decree,
> But such as Heaven ordain’d it first to be,
> Concurring Tempers in the Man and Wife
> As mutual Helps to draw the Load of Life.
> View all the Works of Providence above,
> The Stars with Harmony and Concord move;
> View all the Works of Providence below,
> The Fire, the Water, Earth, and Air, we know,
> All in one Plant agree to make it grow.
> Must Man, the chieuest Work of Art Divine,
> Be doom’d in endless discord to repine.
No, we should injure Heaven by that Surmise,
Omnipotence is just, were Man but wise. (3.3)

The distinction here between the dictates of nature and the dictates of custom not only exposes deep flaws in the practice of marriage but also suggests more broadly that the drama’s concerns over the business of matrimony, false appearances, highwaymen and thieves, impressment, and so on, all share the fact of being symptoms of institutional corruption, whether judicial, religious, socio-political, or military. As the drama illustrates, the enterprising fortune hunters Aimwell and Archer are little different from the highwayman that Boniface suspects them to be or from the robbers who invade Mrs. Sullen’s home. But while The Beaux’ Stratagem broaches such concerns, it is no tragedy. Mrs. Sullen’s rhetorical question, “Must man, the chiepest work of art divine, / Be doom’d in endless discord to repine” is followed by her swift answer: “No.” She announces a resolute defiance that the drama enacts on a formal level throughout, in a series of comic machinations that ultimately, if only in the realm of fantasy, ameliorate the social ills under scrutiny.

Indeed, the plot’s knotty twists and turns gradually unravel in acts 4 and 5, producing a narrative resolution in which Aimwell and Archer 1) expose the Jesuit priest Foigard as an impostor and potential traitor, 2) preempt Count Bellair’s vengeful plot to sneak into Mrs. Sullen’s home during the night, and 3) disarm and restrain the gang of robbers. Boniface, their ringleader, escapes, but only to be pronounced potentially reformable by Archer. And this is not all. Aimwell and Archer further redeem their characters through their interactions with Dorinda and Mrs. Sullen. Aimwell reveals his true identity to Dorinda so that she will not be ensnared into a match with a man she believes is a Lord, and Archer recovers priceless documents that the robbers stole from Squire Sullen, prompting the latter to restore his wife’s fortune to her. Amid these dizzying events, Sir Charles Freeman, a London gentleman and Mrs. Sullen’s brother, arrives to announce that Aimwell is now a Lord after all—a revelation that financially cements the union between Aimwell and Dorinda—and to part his sister from her husband. In a court-like ceremony that Count Bellair pronounces “vera pretty!” (5.4), Squire and Mrs. Sullen performatively enact a divorce based on the notion that their union has not fulfilled its promise. At the end, the rakes are reformed. Aimwell is rewarded in love and money, with a wealthy woman whom he desires and who desires him in return, and Archer leads Mrs. Sullen in a dance, which in the Stratford Festival production expressly suggested an ongoing relationship between the two.
On stage, Lucy Peacock’s eloquence in her role as Mrs. Sullen was matched by Colm Feore’s accomplished vocal rendering of Archer, both in terms of sophistication and comic delivery. In act 3, scene 3, where he recalls having served as a footman to Lady Howd’ye, his rapid-fire yet articulate account of a message he once delivered was a dramatic high point, as Feore thrilled the audience with his linguistic virtuosity, and in act 4, scene 2, when Feore pretended to be Foigard’s Irish cousin, he pulled off the pseudo-Celtic accent with risible panache. While the actresses Sara Farb and Bethany Jillard struggled with the physical and emotional tenor of their characters, sometimes reducing their performances to mere recitation, resorting to modern vocal trends such as uptalk, or lapsing into melodramatic staginess, Peacock and Feore carried the play with their skillful rhetorical translation of language that can often seem dated and alien to today’s theatregoers. Their performances enlivened the language, making it feel fresh and familiar in a way that speaks to these two actors’ talent and expertise.

If Peacock and Feore excelled in particular in vocal expression, the actors Mike Shara as Aimwell, Gordon S. Miller as Scrub, and Scott Wentworth as Squire Sullen stood out in their proficient use of body language and byplay. Shara’s Aimwell was a man identifiable by the swing of his coat, confident swagger, and youthful verve. The pronounced forward kick of his leg upon drinking Boniface’s strong ale or Lady Bountiful’s cordial proved a simple, yet masterly use of comic movement that, while repeated several times, never failed to please. His sparkling performances in act 3, scene 2, where he energetically leapt around from floor to chair and back again as a way to express his passion for Dorinda, or in act 4, scene 1 where he feigned sickness as a means to hold Dorinda’s hand and drop his head onto her bosom were especially well done. Miller’s Scrub provided a number of additional laughs, generated through a humorous hairdo, diverting deportment, and droll facial expressions, directed at times to the audience as a means to break the fourth wall to splendid comic effect. Wentworth’s Squire Sullen epitomized the boozy improvidence of the country gentleman in a way that felt comfortably familiar and even fun without being hackneyed.

Overall, the design of the production—from the blocking of characters in fight scenes or in act 5, scene 4 when the characters close in upon Squire Sullen, to the beautifully lavish period costumes designed by Patrick Clark, to the baroque music arranged by Stratford’s Director of Music Emeritus Berthold Carrière, to the only slight modernization of Farquhar’s playtext (the shift of “usquebaugh” to “whiskey” and “canting” to “preaching,” for instance)—resulted in a brilliant performance that was as entertaining as
it was faithful to the original. As mentioned above, the dénouement of *The Beaux’ Stratagem* features a dance, and while in the context of the narrative the dance celebrates Dorinda and Aimwell’s union, Squire and Lady Sullen’s divorce, and a potential relationship between Lady Sullen and Archer, the dance also seemed a tribute to the success of the Stratford Festival production as a whole.

The dance, however, does not close the drama; Archer does, and with a reflection on the concept of union itself:

"Twou’d be hard to guess which of these Parties is the better pleas’d, the Couple Join’d, or the Couple Parted? the one rejoicing in hopes of untasted Happiness, and the other in their Deliverance from an experienc’d Misery.

Both happy in their several States we find,  
Those parted by consent, and those conjoin’d.  
Consent, if mutual, saves the Lawyer’s fee.  
Consent is Law enough to set you free. (5.4)

Union alone, the play asserts, is not enough. It must be mutually informed and requires continued, renewed consent. It is a message, as the play’s prologue suggests, that is applicable not just in the case of marriage but in the case of all unions. And while in much of the drama, the notion of union is bound up with deception, disparity, and disappointment, in the end, union—reconfigured as a willing arrangement, agreed upon by both parties—seems propitious for all.

Equally propitious is the 2015 Stratford Festival lineup, which features Oliver Goldsmith’s 1773 comedy *She Stoops to Conquer*. Might the staging of *The Beaux’ Stratagem* mark the beginning of an emergent trend? If so, let’s hope it is a trend that is here to stay.

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**Work Cited**