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A sexually charged comedy by the award-winning playwright, about the life of debauched Restoration poet the Earl of Rochester, and his relationship with actress Elizabeth Barry.

The Libertine tells the story of the Earl of Rochester, friend and confidant of Charles II and the most notorious rake of his age. He was an anti-monarchist Royalist, an atheist who converted to Christianity and a lyric poet who revelled in pornography. The play centres on the moment his cynicism is confounded when he falls in love in earnest.

Thoroughly modern in its attitude to Rochester's sexual indulgence, the play is also a thrillingly convincing portrait of the period and an accomplished comedy of manners.

Commissioned and directed by Max Stafford-Clark for Out of Joint, The Libertine was first performed on tour and at the Royal Court Theatre alongside the Restoration comedy, The Man of Mode, which offers another, contemporary view of Rochester.

Stephen Jeffreys is the author of A Going Concern, The Clink and Valued Friends, which won him the Evening Standard Most Promising Playwright Award. He also adapted A Jovial Crew for the RSC.

The Libertine Details

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From Reader Review The Libertine for online ebook

Phillip says

There is a film adaptation of this play starring Johnny Depp, which I think is an excellent movie. And I was familiar with the film version well before reading this play. But the play definitely didn't disappoint.

One of the things I enjoy about this play is that it's philosophical and metatheatrical without being overbearing about it. Rochester is a kind of existentialist, or even a nihilist, and his philosophy of life--born out of boredom, as he says--is constantly being tested, challenged, and disputed. So from an intellectual perspective it's a really interesting exploration of nihilism.

Further the play does a lot of metatheatrical work, because the nature of theatre is discussed extensively, especially in terms of real versus fake experiences of the world. Of course, the main female character is Lizzie Barry, an actor, and much of the plot revolves around Etheridge, Rochester's failed attempt to write a play, and mocking Dryden, so theatre would of course be at the center of this work. Beyond the content, however, various characters frequently begin or end scenes by speaking directly to the audience, giving us insights, views, opinions, etc. about what's going on--which is a device that illuminates this world and these characters.

Melissa Jennings says

Having watched a live production of 'The Libertine', it made more sense onstage.

Antonomasia says

The script is probably better than the film - that was my impression when watching the movie two and a half years ago, and so it is. *The Libertine* is packed with great lines; some of its middling moments would seem outstanding in other plays, and best of all, that declamatory staginess too obvious in contemporary drama works perfectly because this is about Restoration wits and theatre people, and it's entirely fitting for them to speak that way. It incorporates bits of scholarship without looking as if it does, for instance a reference to Hobbes, considered to have had something of an influence, not the most immediately obvious one, on elements the Earl of Rochester's works.

It would be too easy for a character like Rochester to steal all the scenes wholesale, but his fellow poets and playwrights, and the king, can quite keep up with his wit, even if they do all think *it's dull without him*. And best of all Elizabeth Barry, his lover for a while, and eventual superstar of her age, has just as much fire as he, in her own distinct way. (Samantha Morton was okay in the film, but Barry's lines really needed someone with a stronger presence and voice.) The play makes use of a probably apocryphal story about Rochester courting her after offering to coach her in acting - but in showing her as someone who already had ideas for a new approach to the craft, it makes her not his creation, more that she just needed the right person to bounce off. And soon enough she was away, becoming more successful than him (which he did not take too well to) - though the fame of writers from the pre-film era inevitably has stuck more strongly over the centuries than that of actors.

The tone of some of their exchanges was so familiar to me:

R: I still love theatres, I just despise what happens inside them. It is absurd, the way the whole farrago engages people so.

B: It's a world, like any other - the law courts or the counting house. If you engage in life, you engage necessarily in some absurdity.

There's a charismatic aura to such iconoclastic opinionated people that has often drawn me in - typically it's been hardline New Atheists - but at the same time some reflex compels me to reason and argue, and try to make them consider a different perspective on their views. Although on most of them it doesn't work, and the enterprise tires and frustrates me, as we both remain convinced we're right.

Another reviewer has kindly posted Rochester's prologue speech. It's a great piece of writing, and also interesting to read when a bit older, when you're really able to hear someone warning you what they are like, and knowing you once wouldn't have really been able to listen, or not wanted to, or not fully understood as a gut feeling. That this person may be fun, but they will also be a goddamn problem if you get close to them. Though real-life Rochester was not particularly good looking. (I'm not one of those people for whom charisma can make that irrelevant, that sort is to be left behind in the pub having laughed at their jokes and no more.) Contemporary portraits suggest vague resemblance to latter day English toffs of varying destructiveness levels such as George Osborne, Tim Nice But Dim and Michael Portillo. And talking of legendary rakes who weren't actually great lookers, some bits of this story are rather like the later BBC series on Casanova - engaging the troublesome servant whom he saw as some kindred spirit, masquerading for a while as a quack. Or maybe there was a C17th-C18th handbook on rakishness that contained these as tips...

What the blurb means by "thoroughly modern in its attitude to Rochester's sexual indulgence," is not only a lack of prudery in his favour, but also giving prostitutes and servants - not just the wife and mistress - space to complain about him and his ilk; the energy and humour of the play is still maintained in those scenes. It's always clear that the flipside of his charisma and sense of fun is that he's a right royal nuisance, destructive not only to himself, but it's done without a hectoring tone.

Like all great decadent stories, there is decay as well as indulgence:

Time is but dust, and Kings, and me also, the body maggotting so soon, so soon after I was godlike and sturdy. My legs ache in the morning and my brain is the dinner of a slowly ruminating beast.

Perhaps Rochester's deathbed religious conversion disappoints some viewers, but, for a seventeenth century man convinced he embodied the spirit of his times, appropriate, surely.

Anyway, I can't remember when I last had this much fun reading a play.

Chris says

This play, set during the reign of Charles II about John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, has my favorite prologue ever.

Before sharing the prologue, allow me to influence whose voice you hear in your head while reading it. On stage, Rochester was initially played by John Malkovich, and I wish I had seen his performance. I can hear him in my mind delivering these lines. The film adaptation starred Johnny Depp as Rochester, with a slightly, but not overly so, abbreviated version of this prologue. Excellent! (John Malkovich played Charles II in the movie version.) Choose your actor...

"Allow me to be frank at the commencement: you will not like me. No, I say you will not. The gentlemen will be envious and the ladies will be repelled. You will not like me now and you will like me a good deal less as we go on. Oh yes, I shall *do* things you will like. You will say "That was a noble impulse in him" or "He played a brave part there," but DO NOT WARM TO ME, it will not serve. When I become a BIT OF A CHARMER that is your danger sign for it prefaces the change into THE FULL REPTILE a few seconds later. What I require is not your *affection* but your *attention*. I must not be ignored or you will find me as troublesome a package of humanity as ever pissed into the Thames. Now. Ladies. An announcement. (*He looks around.*) I am up for it. All the time. That's not a boast. Or an opinion. It is bone hard medical fact. I put it around, d'you know? And you will watch me putting it around and sigh for it. Don't. It is a deal of trouble for you and you are better off watching and drawing your conclusions from a distance than you would be if I got my tarse pointing up your petticoats. Gentlemen. (*He looks around.*) Do not despair, I am up for that as well. When the mood is on me. And the same warning applies. Now, gents: if there be vizards in the house, jades, harlots (as how could there not be), leave them be for the moment. Still your cheesy erections till I have had my say. But later when you shag -- and later you *will* shag, I shall expect it of you and I will know if you have let me down -- I wish you to shag with my homuncular image rattling in your gonads. Feel how it was for me, how it is for me and ponder. "Was that shudder the same shudder he sensed? Did he know something more profound? Or is there some wall of wretchedness that we all batter with our heads at that shining, livelong moment?" That is it. That is my prologue, nothing in rhyme, certainly no protestations of modesty, you were not expecting that, I trust. I reiterate only for those who have arrived late or were buying oranges or were simply not listening: I am John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester and I do not want you to like me."

If that prologue grabs you the way it grabbed me, you may like the play (or movie). But the prologue gives fair warning and so does history. Debauchery has consequences, and not pretty ones. This play does not *want* you to *like* it.

Blair says

Theatre Royal Haymarket 29/10/16

Dave says

I was introduced to this play by one of my students. It is quite good, albeit very adult in content. John Malkovich created the title character [The Earl of Rochester] in the original cast. Set in Restoration England it is an interesting character study that also gives insight into the workings of the Restoration Theatre.

Lauren says

Playing in London this fall, *The Libertine* is a heady mix of comedy and drama, of the highs and low of a life lived on and over the edge. That I can't manage the trip to see it staged is driving me crazy.

Based on the actual 2nd Earl of Rochester, John Wilmot, *The Libertine* turns Rochester into a flawed,

complicated person, somewhere between a lovable cad and heartless womanizer. He's a mesmerizing character on the page, and I would imagine he's doubly so on stage (operating under the assumption the actor playing him has boatloads of charisma and the chops to play to both the comedy and drama of the character).

A big part of the play's strength is the inclusion of Rochester's wife Elizabeth. Jeffreys creates a complicated portrait of a marriage defined simultaneously by both affection and adultery, and Elizabeth is neither a pushover nor an idiot.

It's an engaging play with modern sensibilities. That is also captures much of playfulness and attitudes I relate to Restoration Theatre is doubly impressive.

After finishing *The Libertine*, I also read *The Man of Mode*, a play written in 1676 and also likely based on Rochester. While I preferred *The Libertine* – which very, very loosely borrows from *The Man of Mode* – it's worth reading both. Recommended.

Elinor Perry-Smith says

So much better than the film in many ways, it's really worth reading the play before you go and see a theatre production. Full of the wit that made Rochester and his friends so funny, and also packed with trenchant observations from the women in Rochester's life. One of the best plays I've ever read.

Charlotte says

hello 999 i started liking the 17th c pls help

Kristyn Lee says

The film *The Libertine* no doubt drew from Jeffreys' play, but it is by no means an accurate representation. If you watched the film and found yourself wanting to know more context, back story, etc. then you should absolutely read the play in its entirety. The play just makes so much more sense than the film, and it's actually so much wittier! Rochester is hilarious to an extent far beyond how he was depicted in the film! If you're looking for an accurate depiction of the actual events of his life, however, you will not find it in this play. Jeffreys definitely took creative license when constructing his version of Rochester.
