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Review of Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* (directed by Jo Davies for the Royal Shakespeare Company) at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 9 June 2014

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Director Jo Davies set her 2014 production of Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* in 1880s London, which she felt represented 'a time of great debate on social and sexual politics and the status of women' (2014, 5). Influenced by the tweeds, tartans and punk styles of Vivienne Westwood, designer Naomi Dawson presented a range of costumes which reflected the upper, middle and lower classes of the 1880s, including morning suits for the fathers, coloured checked suits for the gallants, and long checked wool dresses for the female shopkeepers. In contrast, Moll (Lisa Dillon) was given a selection of modern outfits, including grey slim leg trousers, a white shirt, fingerless gloves, a single earring and a punk belt chain, as well as a tartan vest which revealed the assorted tattoos on her arms, including one of a roaring lion on her shoulder.

This interplay of past and present created 'an imaginative Victoriana' (2014, 2), a steampunk version of a Victorian London which also included an all-female band, inspired by Pussy Riot. Consisting of drum, bass guitar, trumpet and saxophone, 'The Cutpurses', like Moll, seemed to reflect twenty-first century female fashions and behaviours and their regular boisterous entrances to the stage during scene changes emphasised Davies's view that the Roaring Girl would be a charismatic, challenging and fearsome adversary for any potential male aggressor (2014, online).

In delivering the prologue, Dillon lounged casually and provocatively in a chair centre stage and engaged the audience with a slightly mocking, confident and nonchalant air, cigarette in hand. She was seated on a largely bare set, on a floor of black square cobbles (edged by a row of white translucent cats-eye styled lights), in front of ornate black iron gates which stretched across the back of the stage, and a wrought iron spiral staircase which led to an iron bridge above the gates. Street lamps also extended out on iron brackets from underneath the side galleries and were subsequently used to effect in a number of night scenes.

The action took place in a variety of indoor and outdoor settings, including the sitting room where the magistrate Sir Alexander Wengrave (David Rintoul) entertained his male dinner guests with after-dinner drinks. A central trapdoor was used to facilitate the swift entrance of Moll and her band, as well as the contents of the Openworks' tailor's shop, and Sir Alexander's library desk. Display cabinets housing the magistrate's curios (including butterflies, animal skulls and globes) and others containing the apothecary's tobacco, scales and potions were slid into place at intervals, at the rear of the stage. The progress of Moll's shopping expedition in 2.1 was neatly handled, with the tobacconists housed at the rear of the stage, the seamstress in the middle, and the feather shop, (represented by hat stands which were brought manually on and off stage) at the front.

Throughout the performance, Dillon gave an engaging, lithe, athletic, vital and quick-footed Moll, who climbed balconies, swung irreverently from Sir Alexander's chandelier, and demonstrated her skill with a variety of weaponry. Confounding social expectations by refusing to define her sexuality, Moll charmed, flirted, bantered, fought and quarrelled her way through a series of encounters and conveyed a sense that many were tolerant of, and even attracted to, Moll's wit, charismatic individuality, and personal conviction that 'marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse one in its place' (2.2, p.41).

In Davies's production, Moll was not entirely isolated and was often accompanied by her silentmaid Annie (Joan Iyiola); a character not present in Dekker and Middleton's text but who, here, demonstrated a willingness to serve and protect her mistress, and emulated many of her behaviours, enjoying the occasional cigarette and drink from a flask or bottle. She also revealed a talent for pick-pocketing, presumably a reference to her imagined earlier occupation.

The female shopkeepers provided a visual representation of the prudish veneer of Victorian lower middle-class society, with their repressive corsets and bustles. However, they made spirited attempts to maintain a delicate balance between their reluctance to submit to the authority of their husbands and the risk of societal disapproval for their flirtations with the gallants. Lizzie Hopley, as the mischievous Prudence Gallipot, revelled in her innuendo-laden encounters with the caddish Laxton (Keir Charles) and had no hesitation in risking domestic upheaval by duping her benign and infuriatingly doting husband (Timothy Speyer). In contrast, as the strident Mistress Openwork, Harvey Virdi gave no indication of being genuinely tempted to succumb to the charms of Peter Bray's Goshawk, and kept an assertive check on her good-willed husband's own behaviour, with scolds which 'will be heard further in a still morning than Saint Clement's bell' (2.1, p.35). Despite their bickering, the Openworks showed genuine affection for each other and none of the female shopkeepers were in serious danger from their 'shallow lechers', who 'put not their courtship home enough' (2.1, p.35).

Amongst the 'gallants', the character of Laxton was the most developed. As one of the young men who engaged in the 1880s fashion of 'slumming' in the coarse streets of London's East End, Keir Charles gave an exuberant combination of the bowler hat-tipping 'cheeky chappie' and the scheming, manipulative and lascivious misogynist. Moll, at her most vengeful in 3.1, assumed a male disguise of black frock coat and top hat, and sported a maquillage moustache and stubble, in order to surprise Laxton, address his disrespect for women, and beat and berate him for the arrogance of his unwelcome advances and assumption that every women is his 'fond, flexible whore' (3.1, p.49).

Despite the serious tone of Moll's political message about the female condition, in reference to the prologue's stated purpose of providing entertainment rather than edification, the production retained a light touch for the most part and made much of the play's innuendo-laden and comedic dialogue. Lines relating to the filling of noblewomen's linen, the grinding of tobacco, standing stiffly, sons and moons being in conjunction, breeches and codpieces, were all delivered with relish, and the cast seized opportunities for gestures to emphasise their bawdy lines, and engage in visual jokes, such as Openwork's falling to his knees in front of Moll, close to 'the low countries' and Faye Castelow's Mary Fitzallard hiding from her prospective father-in-law, by crouching behind Moll's viol (a double-bass in this production).

There were also many enthusiastic attempts to engage the audience directly, from the young Sebastian Wengrave's (Joe Bannister) charming offer of his umbrella to shelter audience members from the rain, to Sir Alexander's assuming a place amongst them from which to spy on his son, and Moll's singling out of individuals as the subjects of her observations, praise and questioning. One of the most comically indulgent scenes involved Prudence Gallipot asking 'who are all these people?' while reading references to characters from classical drama, and then appealing for the audience to determine how she might trick her husband into supplying money for the greedy Laxton (telling the audience 'I'm actually asking you!'), and foisting on individuals the torn pieces of Laxton's letter in an attempt to hide them from her husband (3.2, p.56-7).

A few textual changes were made by Davies and Pippa Hill, the RSC's Literary Manager, to suit a modern audience, and the mysteries of Dekker's canting scene in Act 5 were somewhat masked by the decision to present it as a rap contest between Moll and the conniving streetwise Trapdoor (Geoffrey Freshwater). Attempts were also made to simplify the convoluted sub-plots, re-allocate lines and remove minor characters such as Sir Beauteous Ganymede, Greenwit, and Lord Nolan. This also reduced the number of characters on stage for the final scene, in which Dillon ripped away her bridal disguise with a joyous and assertive flourish which emphasised her determination to express her personal liberty and reject society's attempts to subjugate or categorise her. Remaining visibly distant from the celebrations following the approval of Sebastian and Mary's wedding, Moll convincingly maintained her personal view that 'Perhaps for my mad ways some reprove me: I please myself and care not who else loves me' (5.1, p.109). That sense of freedom was temporarily shared by the entire cast at the end of the play, as they engaged in a vigorous and upbeat group dance finale (featuring Jack Dapper in a pink punk wig on the electric guitar, as an 'honorary cutpurse') before leaving the audience to exit the auditorium to the sound of Beyoncé's 'Run the World (Girls)'.

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