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# Performance Review of The Busy Body, by Susanna Centlivre

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BY JUDITH BAILEY SLAGLE

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*Review of Susanna Centlivre's The Busy Body: A Comedy, directed by John Sipes, adapted by Misty Anderson and John Sipes, Clarence Brown Theatre at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, February 22-March 12, 2017.*

Susanna Centlivre's 1709 comedy *The Busy Body*, adapted by Misty Anderson and John Sipes and directed by John Sipes, was recently performed at the modified theatre-in-the-round just outside the Clarence Brown Theatre on the campus of The University of Tennessee. This winter delight played to a packed house for sixteen performances and featured period music, elaborate costumes, and stunning sets.

Centlivre's farce introduces two young women, Miranda and Isabinda, who simply want to marry the men they love, not the ones chosen for them by their older guardians. If they must employ trickery in the fast-moving plot to do so, then they are certainly game. But Centlivre's female characters are never so foolish as to forego their inheritance for love—they want both. In Centlivre's later comedy *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, character Anne Lovely finds herself in a similar situation, pleasing her guardians and



Miranda (Charlotte Munson) and her lover Sir George Airy (Jeffrey Dickamore), with her guardian Sir Frances Gripe (Brian Mani) in the background. Photograph by Brynn Yeager.

keeping her £30,000 or marrying her lover and losing it. Anne's analysis is that "Love makes but a slovenly figure in that house where poverty keeps the door." *The Busy Body's* Miranda is aware of this as well, as she also is worth £30,000, over £3,000,000 in today's market; so, she conspires to trick her guardian, Sir Francis Gripe, into believing she will marry him instead of her younger beau. Meanwhile, Isabinda's father has promised her to a wealthy Spanish merchant; and in one of Centlivre's nationalistic moments, Isabinda admits to "loving my own country best"—allusions to Spain's Catholicism in the text and in the performance would have made an English audience agree. Through various plot devices, the two women do get their men in the end; but, in reality, marriage only offers an escape from the tyranny of a guardian or father. In short, this is a play about female liberty, love, money, and nationalism.

While all of the roles in this performance were admirably acted, it was busybody Marplot and servant Patch who often drove the action and sometimes stole the show. Marplot's over-the-top snooping and Patch's droll assistance to her lady contributed to the slap-stick quality of the play, often diverting the audience from some of its more serious implications. Marplot is cowardly and meddling, and his acting, costuming, and powdered wig provided the contrast necessary to make suitors Sir George Airy and Charles appear sexy and rational. Isabinda's woman Patch, on the other hand, delivered lines so bluntly that she became the "straight man" in the comic conversations, totally engaging the audience.

The period costumes added visual splendor to minimal stage props, while some of the wigs amusingly mirrored the personality of their owners. Sir Frances Gripe's two rising points of hair jutting up on either side of the part projected his foolishness before he delivered his lines, while Marplot's feminine curls were the perfect accessory to his elaborate costume and excessive exuberance. The moveable sets created a visual feast that could not help but make one contemplate how a Restoration audience might have reacted to such a pioneering feature in the reopened theatres of the day. The moveable sets included paintings (such as the one of John Wilmot, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rochester crowning a monkey [artist unknown]), elegantly displayed pieces of china, and religious artifacts for scenes with Sir Jealous Traffick, a character enamored with Catholic Spain. An eerie echo followed Traffick's every mention of the name Don Diego to add a stigma to his anticipated arrival.

Music also enhanced this performance of *The Busy Body*, a play originally written without the embellishment of songs—although we have no way of knowing what actually surrounded the mainpiece at its original performance. While the music of Mozart and Hayden would have appeared a

bit later in the century, Mozart's "Warnung" provided a perfect introduction to the performance, and music by Purcell and others embellished the whole production. Overall, this rare Clarence Brown enactment from the eighteenth century offered a whimsical and satisfying night of entertainment in an intimate theatre setting; the only negative was the punishingly hard seating to which the audience was confined.

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