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SF PERUSALS

PLAYHOUSE CREATURES

A Play

by April De Angelis

SAMUEL FRENCH

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ISBN 978-0-573-13007-6

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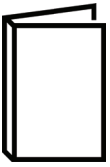
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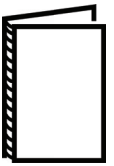
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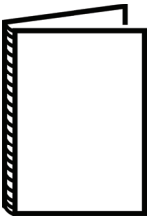
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



April De Angelis is an acclaimed writer whose extensive theatre work includes *After Electra* (Theatre Royal Plymouth and Tricycle Theatre 2015); *Rune* (New Vic Theatre Stoke 2015); *Gastronauts* (Royal Court Upstairs, 2013); *Jumpy* (Royal Court 2011 and Duke of York's Theatre 2012, Melbourne and Sydney 2015); an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (Birmingham Rep, 2008); *A Laughing Matter* (Out of Joint at National Theatre, 2001); *A Warwickshire Testimony* (RSC, 1999); *The Positive Hour* (Out of Joint, UK Tour, 1997); *Playhouse Creatures* (revived at Chichester Festival Theatre in 2013); and *The Life and Times of Fanny Hill* (revived at the Bristol Old Vic, 2015). She's currently under commission to the Rose Theatre, Kingston, the Royal Exchange, Manchester, and the National Theatre.

April has also written the libretto for *Flight* (music by Jonathan Dove), for Glyndebourne Opera and *The Silent Twins* libretto, which was set to music by Errollyn Wallen, Almeida Theatre, 2007.

April's work for radio includes an adaptation of *Life in the Tomb* for BBC Radio 3 in 2014, a serialisation of *Peyton Place*, *Visitants* for BBC Radio 4, and *The Outlander* for Radio 5, which won the Writer's Guild Award in 1992.

TV work includes a BFI/Channel 4 commission, *Aristophanes.*

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PLAYHOUSE CREATURES

Commissioned and first performed by The Sphinx—Women's National Touring Theatre—on 5th October 1993, at the Haymarket Theatre Studio in Leicester, with the following cast:

DOLL COMMON	Jean Marlow
NELL GWYN	Fleur Bennett
MRS FARLEY	Nicola Grier
MRS BETTERTON	Frances Cuka
MRS MARSHALL	Geraldine Fitzgerald

Directed by Sue Parrish
Designed by Annabel Lee
Lighting by Di Stedman
Music by Claire van Kampen

The play is set in London

Time: approximately 1670

For Holly

The first production of this play was dedicated to Elizabeth Howe whose book *The First English Actresses* was a source of inspiration.

"That men of quality should take up with and spend themselves and fortunes in keeping little playhouse creatures, foh!"

Mrs Squeamish in *The Country Wife*
by William Wycherley

CHARACTERS

DOLL COMMON – an old woman
NELL GWYN – a sixteen-year-old girl
MRS BETTERTON – an actress of fifty
MRS MARSHALL – an actress in her late twenties
MRS FARLEY – an actress in her early twenties

PROLOGUE

DOLL COMMON *enters. She is sixty or so. She seems a vagrant, timeless. She warms her hands at a small fire. She addresses the audience.*

DOLL It is a fact that I was born. That is a fact. The how was in that old eternal way, but the when I shall not divulge. No, I'll keep that hugged close to my chest like a sick cat.

Pause.

Once this was a playhouse, and before that, a bear pit. On a hot day, I swear you could still smell the bears. They used to rag me. "That ain't the bears, Doll, that's the gentlemen!" But it was bears because upon occasion as I swept I came upon their hair. Tufts of it bunched up in corners which I saved. As a small child, my father was the bear keeper. I remember the bears moaning at night, and licking the wounds at their throats where the irons cut in and sighing, for while bears love to dance they hate to do it for a whip. Indeed, under those conditions, I believed they preferred the fighting to the dancing, even as blood was spilt and death faced. Sometimes I still hear their cries, very faint and in the wind. *(She stops and listens)*

ACT I

Scene One

NELL *(offstage)* Doll? Doll?

NELL GWYN *enters.*

Is that you, Doll? I'm cold. I swear I've never been so cold.

DOLL *laughs.*

It ain't funny, Doll. Let's have a bit of your fire. *(She muscles in)*

DOLL You ain't changed.

NELL I fancy something. I fancy hot chocolate. Warm and frothy in a silver cup.

DOLL There ain't none here, your ladyship.

NELL I'll ring a bell.

DOLL There ain't no bell.

NELL No bell? How d'you change the scenes then?

DOLL You're slow, ain't you?

NELL *looks about her.*

NELL This is an odd place.

Pause.

It's dark. Dark and it stinks.

Pause. **NELL** *gives a cry.*

Here, Doll. We're not, are we?

DOLL *laughs.*

No, Doll, No!

DOLL *(mimicking)* Oh no, Doll, no.

NELL Aren't I at rest, then?

DOLL *begins to recite, as a taunt, a reminder.*

DOLL "Our play we perform for you this night
For no greater cause than your delight"

NELL This is a dream. One where I forget me lines.

DOLL "We ask alone but one small favour
That you critics have some sweet flavour
'Cos heaven be praised tis not so wise an age
But that your own follies may supply the stage."

She does a little dance.

NELL Stop it, Doll, stop it.

DOLL *laughs.*

We need a priest, Doll. A priest!

DOLL *rings a small bell she has about her.*

You had a bell, you bleedin' liar!

DOLL A priest!

DOLL *exits.*

NELL *runs after her and exits.*

Scene Two

The whole atmosphere changes as **MRS FARLEY** *enters.*

The stage becomes light, resembling a summer's day on a London street.

MRS FARLEY *speechifies in religious tones.*

MRS FARLEY And lo
It is written in our Lord's book
That this time shall come to pass.
And ye have only to look about ye and ye will see that it has come to pass.
Yes, it hath.

NELL *enters, as if from a pub doorway. She holds a jug.*

NELL *(calling in)* All right! All right! In a bleedin' minute!

She sighs in exasperation and sits down.

MRS FARLEY Ye shall see that the cows do not give sweet milk but are dry except for stinking curdles.

Ye shall find all men to be cheats and their hair to be lice riddled.

Yeah, ye shall discover even the women at your hearth to be fornicators!

NELL *(calling in once more)* I'm having a fucking break!

MRS FARLEY And a great plague of locusts will settle in the fields and pester your cows... *(She starts to cry)*

NELL You crying? Don't take it personal. I always shout.

MRS FARLEY Usually I take round the hat. Just then I was making it up. Could you tell?

NELL Seemed all right.

MRS FARLEY He was my dad, the preacher. It was last rites all summer with the plague. He said God was protecting him. And then, just last week, when it seemed to be over, the boils came up. Purple. Behind his knees. This morning thought I better just carry on. You know. This was our spot.

Pause.

There's a lot of work to be done. Stamping out heathen decadence.

NELL How much did you get today, then? Stamping.

MRS FARLEY Well…

NELL Go on.

MRS FARLEY I've not earnt a penny. What am I going to do? I could starve!

NELL That's 'cos you don't know how to work a crowd. I sold oysters with me sister. We had a patter. Crowds like patter.

MRS FARLEY A patter?

NELL You know: "Oyster sucking's better than—"

MRS FARLEY *(interrupting)* We spread God's plain and holy word.

NELL It's like you've got to have a bit of cunning.

MRS FARLEY Cunning?

NELL To get what you want.

MRS FARLEY I'm not sure. I think cunning is against my religion.

NELL God helps those who help themselves. I got meself a job at the *Cock and Pie.*

MRS FARLEY I've heard about places like that.

NELL I serve strong waters to the gentlemen.

MRS FARLEY I've heard it's the devil's own armpit.

NELL It has a decent, reg'lar sort of clientele.

A bellow is heard from the Cock and Pie.

On the whole. You do get the odd difficult customer. There's one bloke won't take no for an answer. I told him I wouldn't go with him. Not for sixpence. I know where he's been.

MRS FARLEY Where's that?

NELL With me sister, and she'd do anybody.

MRS FARLEY Well, I better go.

NELL Where?

MRS FARLEY It's four o'clock. That's when I used to wash my dad's collars.

NELL No point washing 'em now. You never liked washing 'em, did you?

Pause.

MRS FARLEY No.

They laugh.

It's only I can't think what else to do.

Pause.

NELL Do you know poetry? I'll give you sixpence if you teach me a bit poetry.

MRS FARLEY Poetry?

NELL Can you say it?

MRS FARLEY "The angel of the Lord came down and glory shone around."

NELL Brilliant.

NELL *gives her sixpence.* **MRS FARLEY** *takes it.*

That a deal then? You won't starve now.

MRS FARLEY Not today. Why do you want know poetry?

NELL For a job.

MRS FARLEY At the *Cock and Pie?*

NELL No. Across the street. The playhouse.

MRS FARLEY The playhouse! That den of defilement! That pit of pestilence!

NELL I've seen the ladies. They've got lovely dresses.

MRS FARLEY Have they?

NELL I've crept in the back. The candlelight shines their hair so their hair seems like flames. Glittering buckles on their shoes. Gold lace dresses.

MRS FARLEY Lace! Do they fornicate?

NELL Fuck knows. They speak poetry and walk about. *(She demonstrates, speaking in a posh voice)*

"Oysters, oysters, by the shell or by the cup.
Slide 'em down your gullet to keep your pecker up."

MRS FARLEY And they want ladies?

NELL Just one.

MRS FARLEY Just one. Oh.

NELL I heard 'em talking. In the pub. Teach me now.

MRS FARLEY I need to fetch things. A book of poetry. From my lodgings.

NELL I'll come with you.

MRS FARLEY No. It's not far. You wait. I'll meet you back here. *(She moves to the exit)*

NELL I'll wait then. *(She calls after her)* Here, I don't know your name.

MRS FARLEY Elizabeth. Elizabeth Farley.

NELL And I'm Nellie. Nellie Gwyn.

MRS FARLEY *exits.*

NELL *goes over to the pub and shouts in.*

You can stuff your poxy job! *(She waits. She talks to herself)* They want a lady. Lady Nell. Oysters…oysters…and glory shone around. You need a patter. It's like you've got to have a bit of cunning. Cunning? *(She jumps up and looks about her)* Fuck. I've been bleedin' had.

NELL *runs off.*

Scene Three

DOLL *enters.*

DOLL *(addressing the audience)* I wouldn't be a liar if I told you this place used to be packed to the nines. They all sat squashed on benches, which greatly facilitated the wandering of hands down breeches and bodices. Often the talk was like the roar of water and drowned out the stage. In winter you froze and in summer you cooked. It was a foul place really, but the punters came back and back time after time, louts and lords, lords and louts; who could tell the difference? Not so long back they burnt these places to the ground and pissed on the ashes. They swore they'd seen the last of them. But they sprung up again. Like mushrooms.

NELL *enters.*

NELL *(singing)*
SIXPENCE EACH.
WILL YOU BE ENTICED?
ROUND AND JUICY.
CHEAP AT THE PRICE.

DOLL It was a moral cesspit.

NELL Oranges, Doll, I'm talking about oranges! *(She produces some oranges)* Anything I get over the sixpence I keep for myself. I get tips cos of my song. I made it up.

DOLL I don't like it.

NELL You don't like nothing.

DOLL I'm bitter. I've sold every tooth in my head.

NELL What's the play today?

DOLL *The Fatal Maiden.* Or something.

DOLL *goes off.*

NELL *(rapturously) The Fatal Maiden!*

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