

# 'Intelligent' comedy updated for contemporary audiences

*Themes that were true in 1684 are still true in modern world, says Brock professor*

By CHRISTOPHER WATERS  
Standard Staff

Brock drama department's swashbuckling adaptation of Aphra Behn's restoration comedy *The Rover* will have another layer of meaning when it opens on Valentine's Day, says its director.

"It's so wonderfully appropriate because this is a love comedy," said Gyllian Raby, who teaches acting, directing and playwrighting as part of Brock's theatre, dramatic literature and drama in education program.

"There are precious few intelligent love comedies around. There are plenty of love comedies, but to find one that has an intent hidden under all the frou-frou is really a treat."

Behn is celebrated as the first professional woman playwright in English theatre. *The Rover*, which deals with gender relations and skewers the social inequities of her world, was rediscovered in the 1980s by feminist scholars and has been added to the curriculum at universities around the world.

Raby said Behn's play delves into "issues about the pressure on men to compete, the objectification of woman and does that while it is being really very silly" in places.

"These are things that were true in 1684 and are still very true today."

A student cast and crew of 30 are involved in staging the story about soldiers in exile celebrating Carnival Week in Naples. They meet and pursue courtesans in this tale which thrives on disguise, intrigue and assorted high jinks.

"From time to time, I've wondered how wise it was to choose a show like this — it's very big and very splashy. It's got a large cast and is extremely demanding in terms of acting style, but I'm actually very glad," Raby said.

"It's challenging, but I'm feeling very good about the decision both to come here and to do this show."

The Welsh-born Raby co-founded the One



**Brock professor Gyllian Raby: "There are plenty of love comedies, but to find one that has an intent hidden under all the frou-frou is really a treat," she says of *The Rover*, which opens on Valentine's Day at Brock.**

staff photo by Denis Cahill

Yellow Rabbit Theatre company in Calgary, which grew from being a rag-tag artists' collective to one of the most innovative and polished original production companies in the country during her six-year tenure as artistic director.

Her impressive theatre history also includes a stint as artistic director of the Northern Light Theatre company in Edmonton from 1988 to 1991 and two-years behind the scenes at Shaw Festival from 1997 to 1999.

Raby, 42, adapted *The Rover* to be set at the close of the Spanish Civil War and on the cusp of the Second World War.

"I've worked to make the play accessible for the students and for the audience as much as possible, which is not to say Aphra Behn's original is inaccessible," she said.

"However it is considerably more challenging to put on a fully Restoration production with all of those costumes and the incredible convoluted plot. The original would be about three-and-a-half hours to play. Ours is under two."

Another reason for updating the work, Raby said, was to frame the play's underlying message in a context that is more apparent for a modern audience.

"One of the things, I really care about when doing a show is knowing why we are doing a work and what it has to say to the contemporary audience," she stated.

"There's so much information floating around in today's media-saturated world that if you don't have anything to say then just stay quiet."

The author of 11 plays, including the one-act play *Faust*, which essays the various moral dilemmas of human cloning, Raby dismisses critics who suggest the dramatic arts might be made obsolete by new media.

"Theatre is not in danger. Theatre will never be replaced by anything else," she said. "It will continue alongside (other forms of entertainment) because it is imminently flexible and it can immediately respond to social needs and give a reflection of social mores."

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**WHAT:** *The Rover*

**WHERE:** Sean O'Sullivan Theatre, Brock University, St. Catharines

**WHEN:** Feb. 14 and 15 at 8 p.m. and Feb. 16 at 2 p.m.; Tickets \$7 adults, \$5 seniors/students

**CALL:** 905-688-5550, ext. 3257