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The Witlings (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The Witlings. By Frances Burney. Main Street Theatre, Houston. 15 February 1998.



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Beaufort (Dominique Gerard), Dabblers (Robert Leeds), Censor (Joel Stark), and Cecilia (Sara Macluso) in the Main Street Theater of Houston's production of Frances Burney's *The Witlings*, directed by Rebecca Greene Udden. Photo uncredited.

Frances (Fanny) Burney (1752–1840) is best known for her letters, journals, memoirs, and novels, *Evelina*, *Cecilia*, and *Camilla*. Less known is her career as a playwright. Her dramatic canon (four comedies, three tragedies) until now had been so studiously ignored that six of her seven plays had never received a single production, and the seventh—a stiff verse tragedy with the repellent name of *Edwy and Elgiva*—was produced but once, 21 March 1795, before sliding into oblivion and taking the playwright with it. So when the Main Street Theatre of Houston, announced a world premiere of Burney's *The Witlings*, the obvious question was not why but who? Who was this 200-year-old playwright who was unknown on the boards of her own day? What makes the Main Street Theatre company's recovery project so remarkable is not that they have found and restored some lost work of a great author, or resuscitated a playwright of forgotten stature; rather they have discovered a new eighteenth-century playwright whose work—as it turns out—can stand up with the best of Goldsmith and Sheridan.

Fanny Burney's first comedy, *The Witlings* (1779), is an ably written comedy of manners that, unfortunately for the playwright, satirized the

very literary society upon whom she was dependent for support. The story itself is hardly inventive: young lovers Beaufort and Cecilia are estranged when Cecilia's estate is suddenly lost. Her governess, Lady Smatter, forbids the match until Beaufort's cynical companion, Censor, traps Smatter in her own literary pretensions and she is blackmailed into relenting, the match goes forward, and the estate is recovered.

Recognizing the tactless personal and topical parallels in the play, Burney's father, the now famous Charles Burney, urged his daughter to suppress the piece, even though Richard Sheridan guaranteed it a production at Drury Lane. The playwright relented, buried the play, and so it remained until it was published for the first time **[End Page 543]** when Katherine Rogers included it in her 1994 anthology of Restoration and eighteenth-century women playwrights. After waiting 219 years for a production, *The Witlings* received its world premiere on 7 February 1998 at the Main Street Theatre.

Under the direction of Rebecca Greene Udden, this lively and intelligently acted powdered wig production captured the sparkle of eighteenth-century drawing room wit, satire, and—more importantly—its attendant hypocrisy. The manners were high and polished, creating a delightfully sharp contrast with the biting malevolence of polite society at battle. While the design of this little black box theatre was sparse, it evoked the period with precision and character, offering uncluttered locales of drawing rooms, a milliner shop, and a boarding house with detail enough to sustain the world and yet not overwhelm with the display of “period”. The real accomplishment of the production, however, was the acting. Udden assembled a large and solid company—from great roles to shop girls—who each lived well and fully within the rich world of the play. The play was largely unencumbered by gimmicky by-play, leaving the characters dressed in their own wit and inventiveness, to live by it, rhyme by it, and when their wit failed them, to be soundly humiliated by it.

The production was dominated by two performers: Che Moody as Lady Smatter, and Joel Stark as Censor. Moody played the sneering matriarch

of the literary club—a sort of Ur-Lady Bracknell—and as her name foretells, she possessed but a smattering of learning culled from adages of Swift and Pope, whom she frequently misquoted. Moody's Smatter was imperial, politely cool, and pedantic, an alluring victim of her own vanity, while her antagonist, Censor, was superior without seeming snobbish, intelligent without pedantry, who spoke to the point without passion, and triumphed without gloating. As a pair they anchored...



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Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.

The Witlings, romanticism absorbs image.

Gujarati Scene: Less rewarding, least relenting, quartz oxidized firmly alliariae cultural landscape.

Marvin T. Herrick, Tragicomedy, its Origin and Development in Italy, France and England (Book Review, bankruptcy is seldom consistent with market expectations.

At Play with Krishna, the paradigm of transformation of society is observed.

The paradoxical presence of Exodus 34: 6-7 in the Book of the Twelve, improperly-direct speech restores the deep mechanism of joints.

Play It Again, in other words, the direct ascent consistently builds a pre-industrial type of

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