



Nell Gwynn

By Jessica Swayle

Rhoda McGaw Theatre, Woking – 29 November, 30 November and 1 December 2018

Directed for RDG by Mark (Harry) Humble

Play familiarization
and learn song

7.45pm, 10 July

Auditions:

7:45pm, 17 July

Rehearsals:

Mons and Tues from 20th August

Song/dance rehearsals:

Possible additional rehearsals at the learning stage (tbc)

Contact Harry if you would like to audition (reading copies available) : m.humble@ntlworld.com or 07751 094 858

The Play

Nell Gwynn is a comedic play with music and dance about (spoiler alert!) the life of Nell Gwynn, the celebrated orange seller/prostitute who became one of the first women on the English stage and the mistress of King Charles II. All the characters are real people from history, and the events in the play are based, with embellishments, on real life.

Called "pretty, witty Nell" by Samuel Pepys, Nell has been regarded as a living embodiment of the spirit of Restoration England and has come to be considered a folk heroine, with a story echoing the rags-to-royalty tale of Cinderella. She was the most famous Restoration actress and possessed a prodigious comic talent.

The play, while set in restoration times (around 1670s, after the fire of London and immediately after Cromwell's period of republic during which theatre was banned), is a very recent work, written by Jessica Swayle only a few years ago and written in completely modern language with a bawdy style (a bit 'carry-on' in places!) It will be in period costume and features comic songs (Nell is pretty much the only featured singer) and several choruses with straightforward dancing, though some specialist ensemble dancers would be welcome. Gemma Arterton made the role famous in the West End in 2016, and won an Olivier best actress award for her performance.

The action focuses around two main settings – at the theatre with John Dryden (writer), Thomas Killigrew (manager), and the other staff and actors of the King's Theatre Company, and at the Royal Court with the King himself, his advisors, wife and mistresses. When Charles II visits the theatre and spots Nell on stage, these worlds collide. The mood is mostly upbeat and 'a romp', with a few more dramatic moments in Act 2, especially when Nell's mother dies, her sister is attacked, and when eventually the King dies. In real life, Nell wrote and performed her own epilogue to Dryden's play *Tyrannick Love*, and she performs this at the end of our play.

Production

I imagine a grand, colourful, but flexible set on at least two levels to incorporate the theater's Royal Box and the live band that hopefully will be seen on stage throughout. Live music will be an important part of setting the mood and I am very pleased to say Chris Winslet is on board to lead that and help us learn the songs (which are originals for this play – we will be able to get the original score too), and Gemma and Carolyn have kindly agreed to do the choreography. There are 25 scenes in 2 acts, and I am hoping appropriate live music will take us smoothly between scenes. If possible, I'd love to have a real King Charles spaniel on stage at one point – can anyone help?

Characters:

There are 14 named parts, 7 of each gender. **I would also like an ensemble of 4-6 people** to fill up the dances and act as courtiers, actors, and more backstage crew etc. The action takes place over several years. Four of the female characters (*) are independent and could allow for two lots of doubling if people preferred to do more. On the other hand single roles would give more actors a chance to appear and they would then only be required in one of the two acts (also possible with one doubling combination). Ideally everyone will sing and join in the dances (not mandatory for all).

The following is a guide to the parts:

Nell's Family – working class

Nell Gwynn (20-35)

The central character, Nell is plain-speaking, funny, cheeky and holds a strong feminist perspective. A common girl from a whorehouse in Cheapside she was a prostitute before the action starts, and becomes an orange seller at the theatre. There she is spotted, has an affair with the lead actor, and joins their ranks as one of the very first women on the stage. She is initially reluctant to get involved with the King but he does not take no for an answer and she eventually falls in love with him. Once installed in her finery, she rather neglects her family and is forced to leave the King's Company, but returns after the King's death. The actor should be a strong singer, dancer, and be confident and comfortable with bawdy humour and '*décolletage*' (no nudity).

Rose Gwynn (20-35)

Nell's sister, slightly older. A smaller but key role, Rose is Nell's main confidante, especially early on, but distrusts the King and the court; with good reason, as Arlington eventually hurts Rose to get to Nell. She too has a Cheapside upbringing and may well still work as a prostitute.

Ma Gwynn* (50-60s)

Their mother is a small role, a brothel-keeper who only appears in a single scene in Act 2 when she comes, gin-ridden as ever, to the Court to remonstrate with Nell about her neglect of the family. A good comedy role, but requiring pathos in delivery as the scene is a set up for news of her death soon after. Can be doubled.

The King's Theatre Company – (the established men are all educated, Ned and Nancy not so much)

Thomas Killigrew – 40-60

The manager of the King's Company – an important medium sized role throughout the play. He has to take the decision to recruit Nell, deals with the impact of that on the wider company, and battles the consequences of her fame/infamy for his business. Generally kindly and 'normal', Killigrew has the potential to develop a fuller character slightly absent from the primary text.

Charles Hart – 25-45

A very famous actor of his day and the (romantic) lead actor of the Company. It is Hart who spots Nell, takes her under his wing and immediately begins an affair with her. He sponsors her joining the Company and is very jealous of the King, unnecessarily at first. A central role with some comic moments, esp as 'straight man' to Nell in Act 1. Appears as the romantic lead male in most of the plays within the play that we see in rehearsal and performance. 4 or 5 solo singing lines.

John Dryden – any age over 25

Dryden was a fairly prodigious and successful playwright in his day, though his work has not lasted. In this play he is a slightly depressed character always up against an impossible writing deadline (end of the week for a new play!) and is delighted when Nell joins as his new muse – a 'real woman' he can write for. His comedy comes from his reworking of some classic Shakespeare plays...

Nancy – 30-60 (older than Nell)

The Company seamstress – a commoner, a friend and a bit of a mother figure to Nell, this is a broad comedy role

particularly when she has to step in for Nell when she leaves the company for a while. She is a terrible actor and the rehearsal scene in act 2 should be very funny as Nancy wrestles with the acting process.

Thomas Kynaston – 20-45

The actor in the Company who has always played the romantic female leads. Replete with his splendid pair of 'linen tits' he is mortified by the fact a real woman will join the team. Broad comedy role with scope for controlled hamming, but also a figure with whom the audience must eventually empathise.

Ned Spigget – 16-25

The youngest and newest actor in the troupe, Ned is impressionable and nervous, but a champion for Nell who he probably fancies. He opens the play with a terribly delivered prologue that gets him booed offstage by the hecklers, but he grows up somewhat through the play and is an established member by the end. Some comedy lines.

The Royal Court

King Charles II – ideally 35 - 45 (he was 45 when he died)

The real deal – a King! A central character in fine clothes, famous for his devotion to hedonism and restoring a pleasurable and colourful culture to England after the puritans had been sent packing, Charles has an important speech in Act 2 when he explains that his playboy lifestyle and 'do nothing' political strategy makes sense in the context of his father losing his head, parliament having too much power, his having no direct heir, and balancing the Protestant and Catholic factions in the country after years of civil and religious war. He has a wife and three mistresses (in this play alone), and seems permanently up for it... Must wear the regulation wig! Regal but human, with lots of funny lines.

Queen Catherine* – probably older than Charles

Queen Catherine gave Charles no legitimate heirs and theirs seems a political marriage. She has just one Act 1 scene in which she speaks about 20 hilarious lines almost entirely in Portuguese, railing and swearing at Charles about his mistresses. Must be credible with learning to speak the Portuguese fluently and with great gusto (I can't help, but a translation is provided). Can be doubled.

Lord Arlington – 50 plus

Charles' principal advisor, Arlington is a sizable and important role in the play, constantly keeping an eye on politics, parliament and the nation while his playboy boss seems uninterested in affairs of state. His motivations are clear, he is necessarily a bore and a drag on Charles, but this produces some comedy, and he goes to extreme lengths to try and rid the Court of Nell...

Lady Castlemain*

Charles' mistress at the start of the play she is a scheming, clever and highly ambitious woman only interested in the King for the title and children he can give her. She has a couple of good scenes in Act 1, firstly with Charles, getting one over on the Queen, and later on when she makes way for Nell in the King's affections (shades of Another Suitcase in Another Hall...?) Can be doubled.

Louise de Keroualle*

The beautiful, saucy French mistress who Charles takes on, partly for political reasons, while he is still with Nell. Nell is terribly jealous and mocks Louise's flamboyant clothes in one of her comic songs – a production number. Louise is not a large part - she appears in two Act 2 scenes and speaks mainly in French. Can be doubled.

Ensemble

Around 4-6 total men and women. A few odd lines, but appear often as courtiers, pages, dressers, backstage crew etc – people need to audition for these roles as they are important for filling out dancing and singing chorus numbers. Specialised dancers may be given prominent placing – note there is no tap or ballet!

1 Spaniel ☺