

"The Herbal Bed"--a play by Peter Whelan

In the shadow of Shakespeare

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The Herbal Bed is a drama set in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613 and is centred on Susanna Hall, the eldest daughter of William Shakespeare. The other principal characters are her husband, the local physician Dr John Hall; Rafe Smith, a haberdasher and family friend; and Jack Lane, the unruly apprentice of Dr Hall.

The play unfolds around a public accusation of adultery that tests to breaking point the relationships of all the main characters and also throws a revealing light on the harsh realities of life in post-Elizabethan England.

The story charts the development of a growing mutual attraction between Susanna and Rafe. Towards the middle of the play, while John Hall is away from the house they are alone together in the doctor's herb garden where he grows the plants used in many of his cures. They profess their love for each other but are discovered by a maidservant, as they are about to make love. Jack Lane, who has recently been dismissed by Hall, and is possibly in a drunken state at the time, finds out about the incident and announces it in a local public house. In order to clear her name Susanna takes the case to the ecclesiastical court. By the end of the play it is evident that although Hall stands by his wife, he **does** suspect that something has happened between her and Rafe. Things seem to have altered irreparably.

Some Interesting Themes

The story is essentially about the contradiction between human desires and the social conventions which seek to repress them. It also focuses particularly on the role of lies; the small ones which keep marriages together or protect families and even reputations; and then the big lies, which as the Susanna character in the play suggests, are based on the denial of one's own feelings and beliefs. When alone in the garden Susanna announces to Rafe, almost in torment, 'I have always wanted that which I cannot have.'

Central to the plot are differing interpretations of love. We learn that Rafe is trapped in a loveless marriage. Two of his children have died from fever. His wife, it seems, was

already a bitter and resentful woman but this latest tragedy has also made her vindictive towards Rafe. He agonises a great deal over what he feels is his duty; to be loyal to his wife even though he cannot love her. Susanna's situation is similar but more complex. She is undoubtedly devoted to her husband and admits that her bond with Hall is based on her respect for him rather than love.

In many ways Susanna and John Hall present the ideal picture of a 'successful marriage.' Hall is a highly respected member of the community, he is known to be stern but fair. But his decency is combined with a coldness towards those closest to him: 'a frosty man' is how Jack Lane describes him. Hall is deeply grateful, almost incredulous that he has the lively and intelligent Susanna as his wife. In one scene he says, 'God has been good to me,' and walks over to her, as if to embrace her, but just smiles affectionately and then goes back to work at his study desk. This throws an insight into their relationship. In the previous scene we heard Susanna lamenting to Rafe that in all her years of marriage to Hall, he has never kissed her out of pure emotion. One senses such a man cannot satisfy the passions that Susanna feels.

Rafe is strongly influenced by Puritan views and agonises about where his feelings are taking him. At the point where he is still wavering, unsure whether real love can ever pass between them, Susanna offers this remarkable explanation: 'Love changes us, love is Alchemy. In that furnace [used by her husband for the preparation of his prescriptions] everything changes; hard stones shatter, iron goes soft and turns to liquid. Things become other than of themselves when they're in the fire. And so do we ... in love's fire.'

The reference to alchemy also alludes to another interesting aspect of Susanna's character. She studies Hall's books on medicine and occasionally makes up some prescriptions for him, which it seems he even encourages; a highly unusual occupation for a woman in seventeenth century England. But it is again clear from this that Hall obviously appreciates that Susanna is an intelligent woman.

Another subject dealt with in the play is the notion of

honour. The latter seems at times to figure very much in the motivation of Jack Lane, who is a character more reckless than malicious. His main concern while in the employ of Hall is to ensure his father does not cut off his allowance. But as Hall points out to him, in order to become a good doctor you have to be 'driven to cure.' He feels that in the back of Lane's mind is the abhorrent thought of dealing with the diseases of 'the lower orders' which is 'hardly the job for the son of a gentleman.' Lane exhibits similar sentiments towards Rafe whom he sees as a mere 'haberdasher.' These are prejudices that Hall himself has had to break from, coming from a similar privileged background. The sons of the gentry often resented being driven to work by their families, which expressed itself in their drunken and riotous behaviour.

It is a curious fact that of all the characters it is Lane who most consistently rejects making any compromise. And yet it is this that ultimately destroys him. Contained within the eventual fate of the main characters there does seem to be a comment on the mores and customs of the time. What price for the pursuit of honesty in a largely hypocritical society?

All in all, it is Susanna's complex character that illuminates many of the central themes at work in the play. She is pragmatic where the convention is to be inflexible. Her conduct during such parts as the courtroom scene show touches of brilliance. The over zealous vicar-general is determined to get some semblance of a confession and it is quite clear that he would most certainly have succeeded had he not met his match in the tactfulness and wit of Susanna Hall. In all this one cannot help feeling the author is also reminding us whose daughter this woman is. The Bard does not actually make an appearance, but we are told on a number of occasions of his illness and the play ends just as he is about to be brought on stage.

The facts

The play itself was based on real events. As Peter Whelan explained in an introduction to the stage performance, 'It was the pain of the moral dilemma detectable behind this small handful of facts that drew me to write it.' This in itself was no small task, as all the biographers of Shakespeare have found to their frustration; information on the life of England's pre-eminent playwright is very sparse indeed. What we do know is that in 1583 Susanna Shakespeare was born. She was the first born of William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway and said to be her father's favourite. The name Susanna was highly unusual in a town like Stratford and was suggestive of Puritanism. As the Reformation swept England, it was becoming a growing custom to give children names with biblical origins. In 1607 Susanna married a

successful physician, John Hall.

Hall was widely respected for his devotion to medicine although such was his dedication it often went against him. He twice refused a seat on the town council, on a third occasion he accepted only to incur a fine for missing the regular meetings. He also preferred a fine to accepting a knighthood. Five years later, a young man called John Lane who was the second son of a well-heeled family publicly slandered Susanna with the charge of adultery. She took the case to court herself and cleared her name.

On Susanna's tomb-stone is written 'Witty above her sexe, but that's not all, Wise to salvation was good Mistris Hall, Something of Shakespeare was in that, but this Wholly of him whom she's now in blisse.'

Out of these few facts Whelan has created a highly enjoyable play which is both entertaining and truly rewarding when reflected upon.

The music and sound effects in the production, especially the church scene with its eerie background medieval choir, are put to very effective use. Of particular note in the performance, staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company and directed by Michael Attenborough at the Lyceum Theatre in Sheffield, were Jason Hughes and Christian Burgess. Hughes played the affable Jack Lane so endearingly that despite all the misery he eventually causes it is virtually impossible to dislike him. Burgess' John Hall is very convincing, his sombre disposition is never allowed to slip into a detached seriousness and there are even rare glimpses of his warmer side.

The play can be seen at the following venues in Britain:

From May 18 The Ashcroft Theatre, Croydon

May 25 The Civic Theatre, Darlington

June 1 The Playhouse Theatre, Salisbury

June 8 The Playhouse Theatre, Oxford

June 15 The New Theatre, Hull



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