

EXTRACT

POXED

Stella Kent

australian *plays*.org

POXED

© Stella Kent 2012

AUSTRALIAN SCRIPT CENTRE

This playscript is published and distributed by the Australian Script Centre, trading as AustralianPlays.org. The Australian Script Centre, a national not-for-profit organisation, has been selectively collecting outstanding Australian playscripts since 1979 and is home to a comprehensive and extraordinary catalogue of production-ready plays.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

This work is protected by Australian and international copyright law. You have a legal obligation to obtain permission before making copies of this script or performing the play. Contact details for further information are provided below.

MAKING COPIES

Your script purchase entitles you to print the script once only. Beyond this single use, you may not copy or print more than 10% of this script without permission, even if you are covered by a Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) statutory licence. Additional copies may be made with the purchase of a [Copy Licence](#) from AustralianPlays.org.

COPYRIGHT ADVICE

For detailed information on copyright issues, please contact the [Australian Copyright Council](#).

PRODUCTION RIGHTS

Before producing or performing any play you must obtain the permission of the relevant rightsholder. Fees will vary according to the nature and scale of the proposed production. They are set at the discretion of the relevant rightsholder (usually the playwright or their agent). As a general guide, AustralianPlays.org recommends 10% of gross box office receipts or \$100 per performance, whichever is greater, as the minimum fee for amateur production. Your [production enquiry](#) for this play may be submitted through the AustralianPlays.org website.

PERMISSIONS FOR SOUND RECORDINGS & MUSIC

Some playscripts will require specific published sheet music or sound recordings for which performing rights may need to be separately licensed. Producers are advised to contact the [Australasian Performing Rights Association](#) (APRA) for more information on music licensing requirements.

NOTE ON THE SCRIPT

This is an unedited manuscript as provided to us by the playwright. We distribute it in good faith; however it may contain layout inconsistencies or typographic errors

Synopsis

Mr Colley Cibber, flamboyant actor-manager and – by his own admission – the worst Poet Laureate ever appointed, has one aim in life: to become the hero of one of the most remarkable women of the eighteenth century, poet and writer, Lady Mary Montagu.

But Lady Mary has other concerns. Her lover Remond is threatening blackmail and waspish poet Alexander Pope who formerly idolised her, is now publishing poisonous verses about her. Furthermore, when a smallpox epidemic sweeps through London, Lady Mary whose own fabled beauty had been destroyed by the pox, takes the courageous decision to have her little daughter inoculated, using the unheard of procedure she witnessed while living in Constantinople. Thus she becomes the reluctant champion of inoculation in the west, facing the hysterical prejudice of those who scorn a proven method simply because it is practised by old women in Muslim Turkey. By deliberately dislocating the audience, by blurring the boundaries between character and actor and between past and present, the play suggests that eighteenth century xenophobia and misogyny are not so different from our own.

Poxed explores the role played by masks in their many guises – wigs, wit, stays – exploring the necessity of the persona but also the dangers of a narcissistic identification with the outer shell. Above all, however - although the play is full of humour – the story is a metaphor for the battle between the two great opposing forces of contagion and inoculation, of destruction and creativity. The poison spread by smallpox, by the South Sea Bubble, by Pope and Remond, are triumphed over by the good heart of Mr Handel, by the tenderness that brash Mr Cibber is surprised to discover in himself, and by the compassion of Lady Mary. As Cibber who narrates events to the present-day audience tells us, Lady Mary's courage is finally acknowledged when the United Nations declares smallpox eradicated in 1979 and singles her out as the forgotten hero who saved millions of lives.

Characters

Actor 1: Colley Cibber (experienced actor-manager)

Actor 2: Lady Mary Montagu

Actor 3: Alexander Pope (poet)

Actor 4 (Male): Mr Montagu; Queen Anne; Lady of the Court; Turkish Woman; King George 1; Prostitute; Handel; Remond (Mary's lover); Doctor Innes; Minister; Priest

Setting

Scenes segue into various early eighteenth century settings including the royal court, a coffee house, the wings of a theatre, Lady Mary's bedchamber, a Turkish bagnio and Pope's 'Grotto', but none of these requires a set.

In the Tasmanian Theatre Company/ Ten Days on the Island production three onstage Georgian style dressing screens from which the actors entered were also backlit to project black silhouettes reminiscent of eighteenth century cut-outs. These were highly effective but are not necessary. A stand for Cibber's wig could be tall enough to also suggest a human being.

Any production should exploit the post-modern challenge to realism that is inherent in the script.

Costume

While eighteenth century clothes will add great charm to the piece and give point to the moments Cibber addresses the modern audience, Actor 4 will require simple, iconic items of clothing to facilitate his many, fast-paced changes of character.

Music

Handel's music weaves its way through the play but all pieces are well-known and easily found. The author, for example, found virtually every piece on a 2 CD set put out by Naxos titled *The Very Best of Handel*.

ACT ONE

CIBBER, gold-laced and powdered, is shaking powder over his wig on the stand. This causes him to cough. He addresses the audience.

CIBBER ‘Tis no mean feat, eh, managing your wig now the fashion is for it to be light in colour. Still, it will be worse when the tax is placed on hair powder in 1795, but that is beyond the boundary of the story tonight. And I will be long dead by then. *(To an audience member)* You have not felt the need for a wig yourself, sir?... You are still modest with me - I have not introduced myself. *(Splendid bow)* Colley Cibber, at your service. Actor. Manager. Playwright. Of more recent years I have turned my skills to adaptations – perhaps you have seen my *Hamlet?* Most unfairly treated. The audiences came. *They* didn’t consider it ‘a miserable mutilation’. And you must confess, Shakespeare can be dreadful wordy.

As you and I are at the beginning of our acquaintance, you will want to know one or two facts about me. I did commit matrimony. My spouse and my muse were equally prolific – many years she became mother of the child and I the father of a play. I think we had about a dozen each. The plays would pay for the children, except for the occasions I lost every shilling at cards – then I felt I must go home and eat one of the children. No, no, I jest. I have been a moderately good father, though only three survive. And one of them, why no father could take pride in my son Theophilis. And I *have* been a moderately loyal husband. Never a libertine, sir! I may have neglected my wife, a little, but I always remained faithful. Even when my heart – I think we know each other well enough now for me to confess it: who, who could not fall in love with Lady Mary?

Enter MARY, taking snuff.

Tell me, sir, is not that the greatest beauty you ever saw? Why, when she was not yet eight, Lord Kingston nominated her for the annual toast at the Kit-Cat Club as the prettiest lady in the land. Her health was drunk by everyone present and her name engraved upon a drinking glass. And since then, why she is become the finest, most -

MARY Will you take snuff, Mr Cibber?

CIBBER Why thank you, Lady Mary.

MARY *(To the audience)* It is a bad habit and I must give it up. It stains my writing paper.

CIBBER Her name will live on as a poet. I could be excused for keeping her entirely to myself. But I am a man of the theatre and it is our habit to share, even if you have not yet proved yourselves worthy. And so tonight I will present for you *The Story of Lady Mary Montagu*, a heroic tragedy in rhymed couplets.

MARY Rhymed?

CIBBER You think not? No matter - the piece to include a scene set in the exotic baths of the Ottoman, an audacious elopement, a spine-tingling tale of rivalries, and will feature some of the most distinguished personages about town. By God it will do! And I, Colley Cibber - I always excel in a flamboyant role; you have doubtless seen my Lord Foppington? – but tonight I am to play the hero!

MARY You are to be the hero?

CIBBER So I prove... at the end. You do not think my voice sufficient? My complexion is too pink? But Lady Mary, I am an actor. With a different wig, a little paint, I can turn my skills to anything.

MARY Then I beg you, dear Mr Cibber, let us proceed.

CIBBER claps his hand. Sinister music. He makes a flourishing bow and addresses the audience.

CIBBER The Prologue.

Oh pestilence, oh feared pox
That terror strikes in every innocent breast,
A black death stalking through the streets,
It leaves its sufferers dreadfully depressed.

MARY Do we have need of this?

CIBBER *(Aside to her)* I must prepare them. 'Tis the name of the play but the pox does not make its appearance till page 19. And their understanding of the pox is of quite a different disease.

A simple rash at first appears,
Then swells, and within thirty days,

(He catches sight of what could be a rash on his hand and is increasingly concerned)

You could be blind, or scarred, or limbs deformed –

MARY No more! My brother died of it.

CIBBER I am sorry. *(Of his rash)* You don't think...

MARY No. Let us get on.

CIBBER I thought to start with the elopement.

MARY I shall be much relieved when that is over. *(To the audience)* In justice, I should lay before you all the hazards attending matrimony.

CIBBER Please, Lady Mary! We are getting ahead!

MARY Mr Montagu attracted me because he had an education. My own was made up of reading silly romantic novels.

MONTAGU *(A silhouette on the screen)* Is she ready yet?

CIBBER Yes, Mr Montagu! *(To the audience)* Forgive me, but for the smaller parts we are saving salaries and they will be played in silhouette. *(To MARY)* We will pick it up from the middle of the courtship.

MARY He lacked passion.

MONTAGU Women's talk.

MARY Let us be done with this elopement!

CIBBER *(Encouragingly)* Mr Montagu, after seven years, you put the question.

Pause.

MARY I accepted. But my father attempted to imprison me in my room. So of course I eloped.

MONTAGU Right. I'll be off then.

MARY Typical! Two days after the marriage he was gone! And scarcely even wrote.

The slow, solemn notes of Handel's 'Dead March' from Saul.

CIBBER Hush! Queen Anne has died.

The silhouette of the obese QUEEN slowly crosses behind the screen.

I remember her coronation. She was already enormous.

MARY Her coffin is almost square!

CIBBER It is the gout. It translated from her knee to her foot and then swelled her entire body.

Music changes to the joyful 'Le rejoissance' of Handel's Fireworks Suite. Music under.

All the music you will be hearing tonight is by my friend Mr Handel. A fellow entrepreneur. (*Calling*) Mr Handel, come and be introduced.

HANDEL (*Offstage*) Not now, Mr Cibber. I am too occupied with these verdammt bassoon players.

CIBBER Perhaps you will meet him later. But his music! (*To a member of the audience*) I tell you sir/madam, if you are afflicted by the dropsy, or an unexpected rash (*he is momentarily concerned about the rash on his hand*), then let Mr Handel's music fly you up to the heavens.

Music up briefly. CIBBER lets his worries go.

And I am about to experience one of the great moments of my life. Lady Mary - that appalling husband of hers having been made a Member of Parliament - comes to court. Her beauty and her wit make her an immediate favourite with all the great ladies. And Lady Mary, you and I have our first meeting! Remember?

MARY (*She doesn't*) Of course.

Music fades out.

CIBBER My play....

MARY I have always loved the theatre.

CIBBER You said...

MARY That...

CIBBER You...

MARY Adored the play.

CIBBER I played the hero...

MARY Indeed?

CIBBER You said it suited me perfectly.

MARY *(Unconvinced)* I did.

Enter POPE with a very large manuscript from which he reads to MARY.

POPE “And other beauties envy Mary’s eyes.”

CIBBER *(To the audience)* Would I had written that!

MARY You do me too great an honour, Mr Pope.

Enter a society LADY.

LADY And you are a Tory, are you not, Mr Pope, or is it a Whig? (*Giggling*) I always get them muddled.

POPE A poet is above politics.

CIBBER Oh listen to him! Son of a draper.

MARY Your *Essay on Criticism*, Mr Pope, a dazzling work of learning, and felicity of expression.

LADY It was... really good.

POPE I cannot expect sales to be great. Not one gentleman in sixty understands it.

CIBBER (*To an audience member*) Did you understand it? Neither did I. Pope sets out to baffle.

LADY Oh Mr Pope, I have got several of your maxims by heart!

POPE And what is your favourite?

LADY Why... , why....

Unable to quote, she giggles. MARY comes over to CIBBER.

MARY I did admire his *Essays* unreservedly. But at that time I had not read any of the ancient writers. I did not know it was all stolen.

CIBBER Lady Mary, do not be duped by this man.

MARY One cannot help but feel pity.

CIBBER He *is* a Catholic.

MARY For his stature.

CIBBER Ah, I had forgot. *(To the audience)* As a child Pope was trampled by a large cow. An actor can do only so much. *(POPE goes behind the screen where we see him in silhouette. Acting and technical wizardry transform him into CIBBER'S description. The hump grows.)* Imagine if you will, that Mr Pope is of small stature – almost a dwarf - deformed by curvature of the spine and hump-backed. Every morning he must be sewn into a tight pair of corsets and his withered legs are disguised by three pairs of woollen stockings. At least he is no rival for Lady Mary!

POPE *(Emerging from the screen)* Always you omit the best of me!

LADY His genius!

MARY His poems.

Lights change as the scene segues into a coffee house where MARY and CIBBER are reading one of her poems. LADY leaves. POPE moves apart.

CIBBER But *your* poems, Lady Mary – such skill!

POPE Ladies attempting to be poets! What appeal can Cibber have to a woman the like of Lady Mary?

CIBBER *(To the audience)* Do not listen to the dwarf. *(Of her poem)* This one, is particularly fine.

MARY *(To us)* Like all men of the period, Mr Cibber pursued his ends through flattery.

If you'd like to continue reading this script,
you'll find it available for purchase at

australian *plays*.org

The definitive online destination for quality Australian playwriting.