

InReview

THEATER

Adapting Defoe

Marie Kohler's new play *Midnight and Moll Flanders* is an exceptional evening of theater at UWM (through Feb. 27). Produced by the Professional Theatre Training Program and Renaissance Theaterworks, it calls for an immense cast—a rarity in new plays these days—inspiring Renaissance to call upon PTTP's already existing ensemble. With superlative direction by Norma Saldivar and the talents of impressive Equity actors, the perceptive, well-developed script comes across as this season's finest effort yet featuring the UWM performers.

Kohler's work brims with intelligence, solid development, good language and colorful characters. Her adaptation of the Daniel Defoe novel differs considerably from better-known bawdy versions of the tale by never touching Moll's activities as a prostitute. Moll remains sharp-witted



Emma Bates and Laurle Birmingham

and self-assured but, in Kohler's conception, seems more thoughtful and more aware of how her society tossed her into the fog and sunshine of varying fortune.

Her story is framed at night as she awaits her next day's hanging at Newgate prison. She reveals her past to a Puritan minister who has come to save her soul. They revisit her time as an orphan, through episodes of romantic love, seduction, good and bad marriages, prosperity, betrayal, startling revelations and years of thievery.

You might think this means that *Midnight and Moll Flanders* is only a series of swiftly dissolving scenes. But Kohler shows remarkable ability to create several longer, thoroughly developed dramatic episodes. At the same time, she tellingly enhances exchanges between the imprisoned Moll and the emotionally confined minister as they debate the nature of God, free will and blind fate.

Kohler develops Moll so well that you see how the character never loses her ability to learn and to adapt, even to the end. Likewise, with equal wisdom and insight, Kohler uses the repeated motif of Moll's final theft, and its threat of physical harm to a child, as a pivot around which everyone sees how deeply she has fallen into degradation.

In two short scenes, Brian Robert Mani reaffirms his gift for character acting. Marvelously and warmly, he portrays the minister later in life, reflecting on Moll and her surprisingly benign influence on him. Laurie Birmingham's interpretation of the older Moll superbly defines the character's assurance, earthiness and darker edges, her unceasingly quick mind and her ultimate vulnerability. Carrie Hitchcock also creates a wonderfully adept performance as Moll's expatriate mother-in-law.

Saldivar has done wonders with all the PTTP actors, stimulating Gero Mertens into a dashing version of the highwayman Gemmy, one of Moll's loves. Moreover, she and Chukwudi Iwuji get the best effect from Moll's first lover by making him sweetly innocent of the consequences after he compulsively seduces her.

Despite several quite strikingly staged moments, Saldivar never goes overboard for effects, shading a vast array of unforced performances, always keeping the story focused. And Josh Schmidt's music and sound design add other special qualities to this dynamic experience.

—Gordon Spencer