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# Staging Restoration Comedy

## The Royal Shakespeare Company, 1967–2019

David Roberts

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“The richness of this greatly enjoyable book is to be found in the way David Roberts deftly weaves together his deep knowledge of Restoration theatre with intensively researched and observed accounts of the way the plays of the period have been revived, reimagined and sometimes rediscovered by successive generations of theatre artists working within the Royal Shakespeare Company since 1967. For good measure Roberts also lightly sketches in the wider landscape of Restoration drama production by other companies. But the primary focus on the creative imperatives of RSC actors, directors and designers together with an illuminating discussion of the characteristics and varied effects on the actor-audience experience of the different performance spaces utilised for production, make for an invaluable record of a hitherto under-appreciated strand of the company’s work.”

—Professor Claire Cochrane, *University of Worcester, UK*

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*For Hirokuni Kobatake*

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My colleague Dr Izabela Hopkins has followed up on leads with skill and tenacity, while Professor Andrew Kehoe agreed funding for my regular trips to Stratford. I have benefitted from conversations about staging with Sean Foley, Artistic Director of the Birmingham Rep. The advice of Palgrave's anonymous reader has been invaluable. I wish particularly to thank my editor, Eileen Srebernik, for her enthusiastic support, and Asma Azeezullah for her assistance with the production process.

Finally, I pay tribute to the compilers of the *London Theatre Record*, a priceless (but very reasonably priced) resource for all theatre lovers. Without it this book would have been much the poorer. Where reviews are drawn from it, the abbreviation LTR is used with the relevant date ranges given once per show and page numbers in all cases. William van Lennep's

equally invaluable *The London Stage Part One: 1660-1700* is referred to throughout as LS1.

This book is dedicated to my former colleague at Kyoto University and a great devotee of the theatre, Professor Hirokuni Kobatake, in recognition of his many kindnesses to me during my time in Japan.

# CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Twin Custodians?	9
3	Spaces and Practices	27
4	Performance History	35
5	A Manifesto	81
	Index	85





## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

**Abstract** This chapter surveys the different types of Restoration Comedy staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Demonstrating the instability of the term ‘Restoration’, it explores the way playwrights in the period 1660–1700 offered contrasting depictions of male libertinism and fop-pishness. The chapter moves on to consider the range and impact of female roles in the period. It concludes with reflections on the tension between the Royal Shakespeare Company’s historic commitment to textual exploration and the problematic ideologies manifested in many Restoration Comedies.

**Keywords** Restoration Comedy • Royal Shakespeare Company • Libertines • Fops • Actresses • Comedy of manners

What do we mean when we refer to ‘Restoration Comedy’? The most rudimentary definitions turn out to be elastic. Comedies written between the Restoration of King Charles II (1660) and the end of the Seventeenth Century? Or from 1660 to the death of the last Stuart monarch (Anne, 1714)? Should we save the term for the strictly ‘Restoration’ period, covering the reigns of Charles and his brother James II, and use another for the one that followed the accession of William III and Mary in 1688, the so-called ‘Glorious Revolution’? Reputable arguments can be made for