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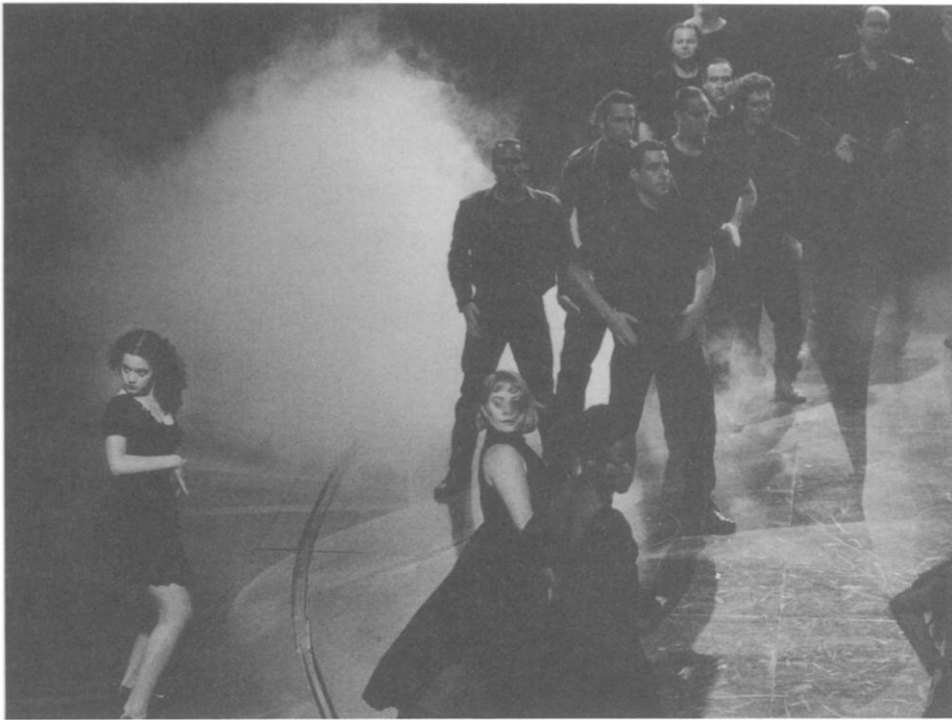


Figure 1. The opening flamenco, Guthrie Theatre production of *The Rover*. Directed by JoAnne Akalaitis. Set design: George Tsypin. Costume design: Gabriel Berry. Lighting design: Jennifer Tipton. Photo: Michal Daniel.

## **Cannibalizing and Carnivalizing: Reviving Aphra Behn's *The Rover***

**Susan Carlson**

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What I wanted was to have Aphra Behn *and* the 17th Century  
looking at us as we created our own world.  
—JoAnne Akalaitis<sup>1</sup>

When JoAnne Akalaitis directed Aphra Behn's *The Rover* for the Guthrie Theatre in 1994, she offered a visual feast of costume, color, and choreography. The focal point of this spectacle was a giant red scrim: a thirty-foot tall banner of semi-opaque, luminous red cloth which curved gracefully from the back of the stage to the back of the house, twisting both audience and actors into its serpentine length. Bisecting both stage and house on a slight diagonal, the scrim fragmented the action, multiplying (and dividing) audience response, confirming (and disturbing) a fusion of mask and identity. As it periodically scrolled open and contracted shut on tracks both above and below, the scrim was the center of the dizzying multiplicity of this production. Reviewer Nancy Franklin likened the scrim to a "giant sail billowing up and propelling the audience and the actors on an amazing voyage."<sup>2</sup> And indeed, its primary function seemed to be the provocation of vigorous audience response; it was, almost invariably, a bold invitation for that audience to partake in the liminality of the onstage carnival.<sup>3</sup>

Akalaitis's evocative scrim, like the rest of her kinetic production, offers up a Behn not only firmly set in the twentieth century, but also fluent in its spectacle. And as Akalaitis's production of *The Rover* translates Behn's action to the late twentieth century, it also offers a rich opportunity for rethinking the challenges Aphra Behn presents for the contemporary stage. In the epigraph above, Akalaitis recognizes the refiguring of chronology and perspective that Behn's play invites. She deliberately focuses her audience on the erosion of borders in a production where the text is a lean borrowing and where the carnival is a paroxysm both threatening and thrilling. Most importantly, in this lavish, high-profile production, Akalaitis recreates the ambiguity of character and ideology that makes Behn's work so provocatively dense. Akalaitis seems at home with a Behn who is not just lively but also explosive, not only polemical but also equivocal.

### I. Cannibalizing the Word

*The Rover*, standing for three centuries as Behn's most popular and respected play, has been perhaps the least tarnished by unending critical contention over the originality of her work. Yet as I will argue below, its late twentieth-century production must first be understood through a study of the palimpsestic nature of the performance text. For the various textual transformations of the rover's story—from Thomas Killigrew's *Thomaso* (1654) to Behn's *Rover* (1677) to John Barton's RSC resurrection (1986) to Akalaitis's rendition (1994)—are the foundation on which directors visualize

I am grateful to Kathleen Dimmick and Christopher Bayes for being so generous with their time, and to Lara Hughes and GiGi Mullins (both of the Guthrie Theatre) who helped me obtain production texts and photographs. My special thanks go to the anonymous *TJ* reviewer for an incisive reading of my work.

<sup>1</sup>Joanne Akalaitis, "From the first Rehearsal," *Guthrie Program Magazine*, 24.

<sup>2</sup>Nancy Franklin, "Bawdy Night," *The New Yorker*, 1 August 1994, 73.

<sup>3</sup>My own response to the production draws from performances on 29 June and 13 August 1994.

and moralize this story of community, identity, and desire. The rover's story is a spongy site of imitation and innovation.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the characters and sizable chunks of Behn's dialogue come from Thomas Killigrew's *Thomaso, or the Wanderer*.<sup>5</sup> From Killigrew's indulgent and inert ten-act play, Behn creates a sleek and active intrigue comedy. In the most encompassing departure from her source, Behn transplants the play from Killigrew's Madrid (where violence is common and the Inquisition is a sobering shadow) to Naples, during Carnival. The transposition effectively dissolves Killigrew's world of stereotyped women, male bravado, and contained disruption replacing it with the mutations and mutinies of a volatile Italian carnival. And in this reconstituted carnival world, Behn is able to develop her women characters far beyond the predictable and lifeless women in Killigrew's play. Her sassy Hellena, for example, has a nominal source in Killigrew, but for Behn this bold virgin is the central player in an active group of women with complex desires and conflicted motives. Behn's courtesan, Angellica Bianca, shares with Killigrew's Angellica Bianca her hefty part in the rover's sexual adventures, but in her Angellica Bianca, Behn centers a concern with women's commodifications by creating an articulate speaker.<sup>6</sup> But driving all of Behn's enlivening changes in setting and character is the vibrant carnivalesque openness of *The Rover*. While Behn's English rover, Willmore, remains the centripetal point of Behn's plot (and Killigrew's), she has developed her source material with the goal of swirling an array of thinking, sensual women to the center of carnival along with him and his friends.<sup>7</sup>

Such innovative revision did not end with Behn, however: the multiple possibilities of her play have provided an ample feast for twentieth-century text-hungry directors.

<sup>4</sup> The originality of Behn's works has been debated hotly since her lifetime. Scholars often have focused their attention on her prologues and epilogues, where she countered the charges against her. See Cheri Davis Langdell, "Aphra Behn and Sexual Politics: A Dramatist's Discourse with Her Audience," in *Drama, Sex, and Politics*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 109–28; Elin Diamond, "Gestus and Signature in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*," *ELH* 56 (1989): 519–41; Catherine Gallagher, "Who was that Masked Woman? The Prostitute and the Playwright in the Comedies of Aphra Behn," in *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988), 23–42; and Jessica Munns, "'Good Sweet, Honey, Sugar-Candied Reader': Aphra Behn's Foreplay in Forewords," in *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theory, and Criticism*, ed. Heidi Hutner (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 44–62. Mark Lussier writes in detail about the prologue of *The Rover*, remarking on its incisive attempts to situate the play in a social and political context; see "'Marrying that Hated Object': The Carnival of Desire in Behn's *The Rover*," *Sixteenth-Century Essays and Studies* 23 (1993): 225–39.

<sup>5</sup> The play was written in 1654 and first published in 1663. But when Behn's *The Rover* was initially performed in 1677, *Thomaso* remained unstaged. See Thomas Killigrew, *Thomaso, or The Wanderer*. (*Parts 1 and 2*), in *Comedies and Tragedies* (1664; repr. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967), 311–464.

<sup>6</sup> For a more thorough examination of the differences between Behn's and Killigrew's women, see Jones DeRitter, "The Gypsy, *The Rover*, and *The Wanderer*: Aphra Behn's Revision of Thomas Killigrew," *Restoration* 10 (1986): 82–92; Nancy Copeland, "'Once a whore and ever?' Whore and Virgin in *The Rover* and Its Antecedents," *Restoration* 16 (1992): 20–27; and Heidi Hutner, "Revisioning the Female Body: Aphra Behn's *The Rover*, Parts I and II," in *Rereading Aphra Behn*, 102–20. While they note the particular departures from Killigrew that Hellena represents, they also mark the consistent significance of Angellica Bianca in both Behn and Killigrew.

<sup>7</sup> Behn's carnival is, in fact, omnipresent—a subject of discussion for the women in the first scene and the setting for all fifteen subsequent scenes in the play. Its masks, costumes, congregations, and liberties multiply the possibilities for the characters' actions. Both DeRitter and Hutner, "Revisioning the Female Body," analyze the importance of Behn's introduction of the carnival.

When John Barton adapted and directed Behn's play for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in 1986, he honored the story's roots in Killigrew, noting "though *The Rover* is a far better play, it is hazy and loose in places, and *Thomaso* sometimes has the edge at specific moments."<sup>8</sup> As he deleted some 550 of Behn's lines and added 350—his own as well as Killigrew's—he intended to "streamline" and "clarify" as well as to update still relevant issues in Behn's text. The results have been and continue to be controversial, especially since Barton's text has become the basis for significant subsequent productions and did influence Akalaitis's work at the Guthrie.<sup>9</sup>

As both Jessica Munns and Nancy Copeland have detailed, Barton's deletions, additions, and transpositions are disturbed by a conflict between his late-twentieth-century "liberal humanism" and Behn's seventeenth-century feminism.<sup>10</sup> Like them, I am troubled by the paradoxical combination of Barton's professed feminism and his attempts to erase Behn's own complex sexual politics. For example, Barton gains his paralleled story of three women surreptitiously courting at the price of the individual agency that Behn's Hellena, Florinda, and Valeria show. Distinctions of character are also masked by an intrusive stereotyping of the women, often notable in Barton's added language. When Florinda enters Behn's 3.5 to await her midnight tryst with Belvile, she expresses fear of the smallest of unexplained noises: "Hush! What noise is that? Oh, 'twas the wind that played amongst the boughs. Belvile stays long, methinks; it's time" (Link, 3.5.7–8).<sup>11</sup> In his version, Barton first adds, earlier in the same speech, an inappropriately blunt expression of sexual longing—"now I ache for Belvile"—and then extends the wind reference:

<sup>8</sup> John Barton, "Director's Note," an adaptation of *The Rover*, commentary by Simon Trussler (London: Methuen, 1986), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Copeland notes that the 1987 Williamstown production used the Barton text as well as Barton's star-casting of the rover; "Re-Producing *The Rover*: John Barton's *Rover* at the Swan," *Essays in Theatre* 9 (1990): 45–60. Copeland speculates that this trend will continue.

<sup>10</sup> Jessica Munns ("Barton and Behn's *The Rover*: or, the Text Transpos'd," *Restoration and Eighteenth Century Theatre Research*, second series, 3:2 [1988]: 11–22) focuses on changes which placed the action in an unnamed Spanish colony in the West Indies and translated Behn's differences of power and position in terms of race. Belvile, Lucetta, and Callis are played by black actors; and in an increased focus on Lucetta especially, the script parallels forms of slavery both sexual and racial. Munns concludes that Barton's attempts to update the text on these counts "disturb the moral patterning of the play" (14). She goes on to detail Barton's altered portraits of women and their relations to men, noting his insensitivity to the fullest dimensions of sexual relations present in Behn and finding his changes both patronizing and anachronistic (19). In stressing female sexuality while deleting Behn's recognition of the specific cultural constructions of such sexuality, Barton obscures "the more political issues of gender relations in the patriarchy" (17). Nancy Copeland also is troubled by Barton's conflation of history and contemporaneity, a conflation out of which Behn emerges more as a twentieth-century feminist than a seventeenth-century one ("Re-Producing *The Rover*," 48). To achieve this historical leveling, Copeland explains, Barton uses Killigrew's words to coarsen Behn's text. Relations between men and women are made more sexually explicit, and the ambiguity Behn attaches to Angellica Bianca's final appearance is erased. Additionally, Copeland suggests that Barton's carnival is too spectacular and his rapes too graphic for him to achieve a workable balance of entertainment and "liberal humanism" (56). She concludes, like Munns, that neither the revised text nor the production is feminist and that they are infected, instead, by a conflict between Behn's seventeenth century artistic acumen and Barton's contemporary myopia.

<sup>11</sup> In the course of my argument, I will be referring to several texts of *The Rover*. I will refer to them by editor/adaptor as Link, Barton, and Akalaitis (references to Link in act, scene, and line notation, e.g. 4.2.3–6; to Barton in scene [lower case roman] and page reference, e.g. scene ii, 28; and Akalaitis in

Hark! What noise is that? Oh, 'twas the wind that played amongst the boughs. Belville stays long, methinks, it's time. *O fie, the wind has ruffled my hair. I'll get a mirror to make it fine again.*  
[Barton, scene xi, 48; emphasis mine]

Florinda becomes a woman belittled by a preoccupation with her looks; her real fears are trivialized. In other words, Behn's development of Florinda as a reluctantly rebellious woman is replaced, in Barton, with signs of her frivolity.

Barton's impulse to generalize about women's behavior is more systematically present in those scenes where he turns Behn's three gentlewomen—Hellena, Florinda, and Valeria—into a trio of women equally giddy with their blatantly expressed sexual desire. Behn's Hellena and Florinda are sisters of very different ilk who join with a kinswoman, Valeria, in their carnival capers. While there is some parallelism implied in their ventures, they are clearly differentiated in their motivations, language, and actions. Barton instead stresses their similarities, raising Valeria to the status of a sister to Hellena and Florinda, and significantly increasing her speeches (and presence) in the play. It does not seem to matter that his transfer to Valeria of many of Hellena's strongest lines significantly increases Valeria's presence at the same time it decreases Hellena's agency.<sup>12</sup> The newly uniform responses of the women are most obvious at those moments when Barton invents for his three sisters a choral response to events, a response usually focused on their quest for sexual satisfaction. While this occurs demonstrably in at least four scenes (Barton's scenes ii, iii, viii, and xvi), it is most blatant in scene ii. As Barton's three sisters prepare—for the first time—to join the carnival, they and governess Callis banter in sexually explicit terms. I have highlighted the phrases which seem the most intrusive additions from Barton:

- Hellena: Now have *I rare itch to dance and to lure fellows.*  
 Florinda: Who will like thee well enough to have thee, that sees what a mad wench thou art?  
 Hellena: Like me? I don't intend every he that likes me shall have me, but he that I like. I should have stayed in the nunnery still if I had liked my lady abess as well as she liked me. No, I came thence not, as my wise brother imagines, to take an eternal farewell of the world, but to love and to be beloved; and I will be beloved, or *I'll get one of your men, so I will.*  
 Valeria: Am I put into the number of lovers?  
 Hellena: You? Why, sister, I know *thou'rt as hot within as any lady in the Indies.*  
 Valeria: *Then let's vie with one another who shall first win her man.*  
 Florinda: I'll write a note ere we go, and if I chance to see Belville, although he will not know me, I'll give it him to let him know Florinda favours him. Yea, and I'll give him too all the letters I have writ but dared not send for fear of my brother.  
 Valeria: Haste, haste.  
 Callis: Hark how gay it sounds.

scene [arabic] and page reference, e.g. scene 7, 45). See *The Rover*, ed. Frederick Link, *Regents Restoration Drama* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967); *The Rover*, an adaptation by John Barton, commentary by Simon Trussler (London: Methuen, 1986); and *The Rover*, version compiled by JoAnne Akalaitis and Kathleen Dimmick (Guthrie Theatre Production, 1994). See also a more recent edition of *The Rover*, ed. Anne Russell (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1994), which includes a careful analysis of the play's production history.

<sup>12</sup>While the women's lines are bartered throughout the text, the most prominent example of Barton's reduction of Hellena comes in the final scene, where other characters are also involved. Behn's Hellena takes command of all onstage characters as she asks "Let most voices carry it: for heaven or the captain?" (Link, 5.1.525–26). Barton gives the powerful line to Belville.

Florinda: Fie, Valeria, *thou look'st too wanton.*  
 Valeria: *Why so I am, and will be!*  
 Hellena: Let's go.  
 Callis: Now St. Jago, that is patron of Carnival, smile on our devising.  
 Florinda: Why then lead on: *Though I be shamed or shent*  
           I'll try my fortune too ere it be Lent.

[Barton, scene ii, 28]<sup>13</sup>

Such taunting and rivalry replace what is, in Behn, the much shorter, though much more subtle discussion of Hellena and Florinda's unsatisfied sensual needs and their decision to sneak away from their brother's watch (see Link, 1.1.177–89).

If I had the space for more text, I could make the point still more emphatically that Barton gains his active portrait of sisterly buddies at the expense of nuanced expressions of character. It should be noted, for instance, that kinswoman Valeria is not even present in the comparable scene in Behn. Perhaps more importantly, during the dialogue above, Barton adds a wardrobe change: the women are undressing and redressing on stage, donning their carnival costumes. While Barton, perhaps, saw the change as a visualization of the women's newly staked claim to agency, I would suggest that in the context of these other textual changes, the dressing more notably enhances their visibility as sexual objects.

Let me point to one other significant alteration in Barton's text—his recreation of Angellica Bianca—to provide a final prelude for a consideration of Akalaitis's revisions. While Angellica Bianca remains a crucial player, Barton makes her less fully dimensioned than in Behn. Copeland notes that her long, contemplative speeches are reduced, her sensuality enhanced, and—as a result—the ambiguity of her social status reduced.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Munns argues that Barton's changes disturb the powerfully unorthodox position Behn's Angellica Bianca carves out for herself.<sup>15</sup> I must point out, however, that Barton's Angellica Bianca remains prominent: she was cast ostentatiously in his production (he first cast Sinead Cusack, wife of his Willmore, Jeremy Irons; he later cast Stephanie Beacham, popular star of British TV soap operas). Barton also moves mention of Angellica Bianca to his play's first scene. He thus enhances her prominence in the bartering of desire to follow. Yet as Munns and Copeland show, he then proceeds to send conflicted messages about how to interpret her pivotal role. For instance, her own bravos, Sebastian and Biskey, are less than loyal in Barton, opening scene v with their cynical analysis of her scheme to lure men, seemingly disloyal in their uninhibited talk (in lines provided by Barton). And Barton's altered presentations of Angellica Bianca in scenes vii, xv, xix, and xx offer up a woman whose jealousies reduce her to spite and sentimental drivel. For example, when she first meets Willmore in Barton's scene vii, their dialogue is largely bleached of her wit and vulnerability. And when she finally parts from him in scene xix, she is reduced to the simplistic responses provided by Barton:

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that in his many changes to the dialogue at this point, Barton is also inserting lines that occur in different scenes in Behn. In other words, all of the changes here do not represent new language from Barton.

<sup>14</sup> Copeland, "Re-Producing *The Rover*," 52.

<sup>15</sup> Munns, "Barton and Behn's *The Rover*," 15.

You said you loved me.  
 .....

And yet by god, I will not  
 Share you with any. I am one that would have  
 All or none.

[Barton, scene xix, 67]

Such lines simplify Angellica Bianca's rivalry with Hellena as well as her motives for seeking out Willmore at the end.

In Behn, I would argue, Angellica Bianca destabilizes the meaning of love and marriage; she is forced to recognize the handicaps and advantages of being a sexually active woman seeking to fulfill her desire for love. In Barton, she is a whore who learns what the others already know: she must remain an outsider. While Barton's Lenten ending indicates his own desire to avoid simplistic comic solutions, he has nevertheless sacrificed the ambiguity Angellica Bianca so clearly embodies—an ambiguity other recent directors have been keen on preserving.<sup>16</sup>

When JoAnne Akalaitis agreed to direct *The Rover* for the Guthrie, she and her dramaturg, Kathleen Dimmick, went through an elaborate review of the various available texts. They relied on Barton as their "copy text"; but with an attentive eye to Behn as well as Killigrew, they produced their own distinctive and streamlined version. It's a composite text, drawing heavily from Barton's attempts to clarify and update while honoring Behn's artistry. As Dimmick puts it, "we ended up with . . . a text that is closer to the Behn original than the RSC, but preserved some things from the RSC."<sup>17</sup> It's a lean text which makes the spectacle of Akalaitis's twentieth-century milieu an equal partner to the word.

The Akalaitis version of Behn's scenes 3.2 and 3.3—the scenes at Lucetta's house during which Blunt is stripped of honor, money, and clothes—suggests the care taken with textual considerations. Drawing from Barton as well as Behn, Akalaitis pares these scenes to the core of their language and action. While Akalaitis's version is notably shorter than Behn's or Barton's, prior texts are not disregarded, but guardedly used. Akalaitis drops most of Barton's sexually explicit language, for example, and finds something of a middle ground between Behn and Barton in characterizing Lucetta and Blunt. Behn focuses attention on Lucetta's lack of agency by stringing her precariously between her pimp Sancho and her gallant Philipppo. Philipppo's ultimate control is chilling: he harvests the material goods and money Lucetta and Sancho cull from Blunt, belittles her guilt and regret, and claims her for his own bed: "Come, that thought makes me wanton: let's to bed" (Link, 3.3.61). Barton extends the harshest of such moments by letting Lucetta give voice to her own oppression, and he simplifies

<sup>16</sup> Both Akalaitis and director Carol MacVey (in a Princeton University production) wanted to present an Angellica Bianca who remained a question mark not resolvable in the action of the play (according to Carol MacVey, telephone interview with the author, 5 January 1995).

<sup>17</sup> In a telephone interview with the author on 25 May 1994, Dimmick reported that she and Akalaitis spent a month with the various texts putting together their performance version; the texts included Killigrew, two RSC scripts, and Janet M. Todd's edition of Behn, *Oroonoko, The Rover, and Other Works* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1993). Dimmick and Akalaitis also drew on previous textual work between Akalaitis and Jim Lewis.



her lamentable position by collapsing the roles of Sancho and Philippo in his “composite” Sancho, “her man.”<sup>18</sup>

Akalaitis maintains Barton’s fusion of Philippo and Sancho but underscores Lucetta’s servitude in a new way by adding a single line in place of Barton’s many additions. Just before Lucetta goes off with Blunt, Akalaitis’s Sancho threatens her:

Thou shalt bear yourself gently enough to make him hot, but not so hot that he undo you.  
I’ll thump you if you lick him.

[Akalaitis, scene 10, 59]

The line is chillingly effective as it highlights the precarious nature of Lucetta’s position among so many men. This scene, like many of Akalaitis’s, is pared to its telegraphic essence; such an addition, then, carries significant weight. As it bears a threat of violence it also demonstrates a guiding principle of Akalaitis’s condensed text—a tight partnership between word and action. Akalaitis’s scene also maintains an imagistic independence from both Behn and Barton in its focus on a degenerating Blunt. Her altering of characterization makes room for the dark visualizations of Blunt that will follow in succeeding scenes and come to dominate the second half of the production. In fact, the grotesque visions that dominate part two are previewed not only in the threatening delivery of Blunt’s lines at the end of this scene (and just before the interval), but also in the appearance of the three giant (maybe twenty feet high), billowing cloth penises that rise ominously around him on his exit and remain up during the interval. While the text is often thus subordinated to provocative visuals, the language remains, nevertheless, an honored marker of the complex characterizations of Behn’s play.

While Akalaitis’s melding of sparse words and big images dominates her creation of a play text, a corollary principle in her textual cropping seems to be a desire to bring to Behn’s action a twentieth-century sensibility. As Akalaitis says, “The challenge for me with *The Rover* was to take the feeling and style of the seventeenth century and make it thoroughly contemporary.”<sup>19</sup> While the flashy performance is the main site of such temporal refocusing, the text, too has been altered to play to the 1990s. Akalaitis’s prologue is an instructive example.

<sup>18</sup> In his version of this scene (scene x), Barton, drawing from Killigrew, significantly expands the exchanges between Sancho and Lucetta, enhancing his portrait of Lucetta as a woman enslaved. Barton also makes the interaction between Blunt and Lucetta much more sexually explicit, adding lines such as the following:

Will you be gentle? (Lucetta)  
Let’s to bed and assay who is the hotter. (Lucetta)  
Here every look or touch inflames or burns my blood. (Blunt)

[Barton, scene x, 46]

One additional change further underscores the altered mood of Barton’s scene. The end of Blunt’s final speech (after his duping) is recast from prose to rhymed verse, more than tripling the effect of Behn’s solitary final couplet, creating a formal distance and inviting laughs at the same time. Akalaitis departs significantly from such comedy.

<sup>19</sup> Akalaitis, “From the first Rehearsal,” 24. The decision to contemporize contributes to the sparseness of the text: Akalaitis drops many more than the 550 lines Barton deleted and is loathe to add any of her own.

The prologue takes full advantage of the Guthrie's modified theatre-in-the-round staging of the play. In addition to the theatre's crescent-shaped house (which surrounds the audience on three sides), there are about fifty seats on risers at the back of the stage, arranged in two non-symmetrical sections and separated by an aisle. The onstage audience members, then, are looking past—or with—the actors to the main part of the audience in the house. The prologue Akalaitis uses to welcome these multiple audiences is not Behn's (forty-three lines of prologue that, in the Restoration tradition, situate this play in the 1670s context of finicky critics and self-aggrandizing audiences). Instead, the prologue is of the moment, all about playgoing at the Guthrie, and an early signal of Akalaitis's insistence on active audience involvement. The Guthrie production opens with the actor playing Blunt, Christopher Bayes, entering alone to give the onstage audience (he tells those in the main house that they can listen if they want) an all-new, improvised prologue, a comic glimpse of life backstage at the Guthrie. While the Minneapolis Fire Marshall, in fact, had demanded that onstage spectators be informed of available fire escape routes, Akalaitis and Bayes have taken that pedestrian regulation and—in the spirit of Behn—transformed it into a hilarious look at actors' vanity as well as the labyrinths of backstage scaffolding.<sup>20</sup> Akalaitis's contemporary variations on Behn's text are similarly evident in her resurrection of Sebastian and Biskey as a pair of CIA-style intelligence officers parading with walkie-talkies, in her translation of Angellica Bianca's advertising to red neon and video projection, and in the Elvis mystique that surrounds Sancho. In a way that Behn could not have foreseen, her text not only absorbs but also seems to invite such culturally specific time travel.

Earlier I aligned my criticisms of Barton's revisions with those of Munns and Copeland, registering my concerns about his disruptions of Behn's character portraits as well as his insensitivity to her politics. Akalaitis, in fact, takes on many of the Barton transformations I find problematic (his rearranging of initial scenes, his enhancement of Valeria [to allow for the parallel treatment of three sisters], and his diminishing of Angellica Bianca's language), yet I am much more sanguine about what Akalaitis's changes portend for the possibilities of Aphra Behn on the contemporary stage. This may be, in part, because I have witnessed Akalaitis's *Rover* and not Barton's. I think, however, it is more clearly traceable to the nature of Akalaitis's updating of Behn's text: she avoids, for example, Barton's linguistic sensationalizing of sexuality, finding a physical and visual updating more potent. But most centrally, in both her clipped text and her contemporary setting, she gives vibrant articulation to the dark underbelly of desire present in Behn. There is a visceral punch in her series of degenerating carnivals, in her increasing dependence on a desperate Blunt, and in her portraits of women who—in seeking love and security—find themselves in fits and starts of despair and desire.

<sup>20</sup> Akalaitis's production also has a sense of epilogue borrowed, in part, from Barton. The re-entry to real life signaled by an epilogue is played out in the visual movement to Lent. Of more interest, perhaps, is Akalaitis's finally aborted attempt to begin part two of her production with an excerpt from Angeline Goreau's biography of Behn, *Reconstructing Aphra* (New York: Dial, 1980).

## II. Carnivalizing Performance

Akalaitis's careful textual revisions make possible a *Rover* most notable for its translations of Behn's characters and concerns to late-twentieth-century idioms of relationship and sexuality. It is a dizzying display of ritualized movement and instinctual responses, a world where issues are condensed in image. In the program, Akalaitis (following Behn's lead) describes hers as a theatre directed at the subconscious and pre-verbal:

Aphra Behn wrote, "Plays are secret instructions to people about things that 'tis impossible to insinuate into them any other way." I do believe that theater is a secret subconscious instruction—a profound event that is non-intellectual and abstract. It resides in those moments of spiritual brilliance, when an actor on the stage and someone in the audience share, at the deepest possible level, a heightened moment—and neither one can say exactly what it is.<sup>21</sup>

I find the effect more fully assaultive, for this production ceaselessly rouses the senses, prohibiting passive response. It is, as Mikhail Bakhtin would say "concretely sensuous."<sup>22</sup> As Akalaitis develops the radical possibilities of comedy, the audience must confront social and ideological contradictions about desire and rape, individuality and community. This is not a production that the audience can simply "enjoy."<sup>23</sup> With a focus on three key tropes in Akalaitis's production—carnival, anti-carnival, and stylization—I hope to demonstrate how the debates which power Behn's play remain vital in our time.<sup>24</sup>

### Four carnivals

With its "jolly relativity of every system and order, every authority and every (hierarchical) position,"<sup>25</sup> carnival is undeniably at the center of Behn's play; her remaking of Killigrew is premised on the alluring insurgency of carnival. And as Mark Lussier and Heidi Hutner have detailed, the liberties of carnival make possible the women characters' agency as well as the play's assault on social institutions like

<sup>21</sup> Akalaitis, "From the first Rehearsal," 24. This description is in keeping with the philosophy of directing Akalaitis expresses in her interview with Arthur Bartow in *The Director's Voice: Twenty-One Interviews* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 1–19. In a general description of the Guthrie production during her interview, dramaturg Dimmick similarly noted the focus on "visual and conceptual." See also Susan Green who finds Behn's plays emotional and erotic, not intellectual; "Semiotic Modalities of the Female Body in Aphra Behn's *The Dutch Lover*," in *Rereading Aphra Behn*, 124.

<sup>22</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. R. W. Rotsel (n.p.: Ardis, 1973), 101.

<sup>23</sup> Akalaitis seems to have been fully aware of the challenge to the viewer. Actor Christopher Bayes (in an interview with the author on 14 January 1995 in Ames, Iowa) notes that the audience couldn't easily walk away thinking of the production, "that was nice." He also reports that Akalaitis added upbeat music for the final call so that the audience might leave believing they *had* had a good time, in spite of the dark production.

<sup>24</sup> The Guthrie/Akalaitis production is one of a growing number of productions of Behn. Other recent productions of *The Rover* include those at The Williamstown Theatre Festival (July 1987), Princeton University, University of Illinois at Urbana (1990), New Cross Theatre (1991), and Union Theatre (Peterborough, Ontario, 1995). For details, see Jane Spencer, "Critical Introduction," *Selected Plays of Aphra Behn*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press; see also Anne Russell's introduction to her edition of *The Rover*.

<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin, 102.

marriage.<sup>26</sup> Akalaitis's is a carnival of the grotesque, a release of inhibition, a testing of new positions and powers in an alternative ludic space. Yet her carnival, like Bakhtin's, is much more complex than simple celebration. It is a testing of new possibilities against a display of established orthodoxy. In other words, Akalaitis models a "counter-hegemonic" celebration in which she recognizes a full range of ideological and cultural transgression.<sup>27</sup> Most importantly, the carnival Behn creates and Akalaitis expands is unpredictable and thus especially threatening for women. It can enable feminist rhetoric one moment and rape the next. As Mary Russo warns, we must measure Bakhtin's nostalgia for carnival against a recognition that carnival displaces but cannot erase differences of gender and social power; that women, in particular, are "already transgressive—dangerous and in danger."<sup>28</sup> In the pages to follow, I hope to demonstrate how, in her production, Akalaitis seems cognizant of the gendered dimensions of carnival's foundation in cultural and ideological conflict, and how she involves the audience in this ideational turmoil.

There are, in fact, four separate carnival scenes in Akalaitis's production.<sup>29</sup> The first is a "traditional, classic, big carnival," and the next three are progressive steps in a communal deterioration and exhaustion.<sup>30</sup> Yet even before her first carnival, Akalaitis establishes the festal, parodic voice of her production by following the prologue with a big flamenco flourish. The whole company—all dressed in black—enter in a phalanx, stomping and clapping to vibrant flamenco music. With severe, drawn faces and well-defined, synchronized movement, they tap out the dance of desires to follow in the

<sup>26</sup> Lussier and Heidi Hutner ("Revisioning the Female Body"). Nancy Copeland ("Re-Producing *The Rover*") offers an alternative reading of the effects of carnival in performance, marking how in Barton's production the carnival is a contradictory device, at times promoting voyeurism and violence, at times allowing focus (53–55). She usefully notes the multiple and potentially uncontrollable effects of performing carnival.

<sup>27</sup> I borrow my terminology here from Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 26. Their inclusive definition of transgression (see esp. 1–26) is a useful starting point for thinking about the obversions of the normative in Akalaitis's production.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 217. Russo sums up her argument about women and carnival by saying, "There are especial dangers for women and other excluded or marginalized groups within carnival, though even the double jeopardy that I will describe may suggest an ambivalent redeployment of taboos around the female body as grotesque (the pregnant body, the aging body, the irregular body) and as unruly when set loose in the public sphere" (214). See also three studies of women and Bakhtinian carnival collected in *Bakhtin Carnival and Other Subjects: Selected Papers from the Fifth International Bakhtin Conference, University of Manchester, July 1991*, ed. David Shepherd (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993); Ruth Ginsburg, "The Pregnant Text. Bakhtin's Ur-Chronotope: The Womb" (165–76); Clive Thomson, "Bakhtin and Feminist Projects: Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*" (210–28); and Mary S. Pollock, "What is Left Out: Bakhtin, Feminism, and the Culture of Boundaries" (229–41).

<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin himself details a progression of four carnivals from 1) the "free, familiar contact among people" to 2) "eccentricity" or a "new modus of interrelationship of man with man" to 3) "carnivalistic mésalliances" to 4) "profanation" (*Problems*, 100). With his four categories of carnival, Bakhtin is attempting to give some shape to the centuries of the carnival impulse he generalizes about. In her four carnivals, Akalaitis offers a similar progression from socially open congregation to scatological critique, but she adds a degeneration darker than I find in Bakhtin. For further analysis of Bakhtin's four carnivals, see Renate Lachmann, "Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture," trans. Raoul Eshelman and Marc Davis, *Cultural Critique* 11 (1988–1989): 142.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Dimmick.

play (see fig. 1, p. 517). The men and women are segregated, though intensely aware of one another; so when the men exit first, the women follow in pursuit. The flamenco is heated and sexy; its women strong.<sup>31</sup> And the pulsing energy is alluring to the audience; for, like the prologue, this dance is an invitation to the audience to join in, to be part of all the carnivals to come. After all, the carnival is, according to Bakhtin, not viewed but experienced: "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. When carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it."<sup>32</sup> His words to this effect are strong and so is Akalaitis's staging, though already she makes the invitation to her audience as much a challenge as a gift. In addition to this equivocal beckoning of the audience, the flamenco also initiates the liminality of Akalaitis's carnival. For while the opening carnival in Akalaitis's production is still two scenes away from this heated dance, the possibilities for alterity accumulate from this moment. For example, during the Englishmen's discussion in the successive scene (Akalaitis's scene 1; Behn's 1.2), the men's fraternity is infiltrated by carnival celebrants drifting on- and offstage: women dressed in colorful Latin dress, men in flesh-colored body suits with women's breasts. Such supernumeraries are precursors to the full carnival that spills out at the end of the second scene.

Dimmick identifies the first carnival as a Gypsy carnival, an epithet that accurately describes the high spirits, bright colors, and upbeat celebration that fill the theatre. The sisters in their Gypsy costumes (Behn herself identifies the "Gypsy" dress [Link, 1.2.127]) are hypnotically drawn out from the staid safety of their home as the celebration swells around them. The music comes up,<sup>33</sup> the light changes (onto the audience, in fact), the scrim swiftly spirals out (for the first, breathtaking time), and the stage fills with the transformative possibilities of carnival. There are giant Mardi Gras puppets, neon lights, brightly colored flounces on women, masks, ruffs, and sashes on men (see fig. 2). Angellica Bianca shimmers in a metallic silver body suit, and the three sisters are gaudily decorated in pink, turquoise, orange, blue, green, and red. There is constant movement, sometimes graceful and dance-like, sometimes awkward and involuntary. Some celebrants curl up and down the circular staircase and cat-walk at center stage; others twist among the onstage audience and meander through the entire house on ramps and in aisles. While a kind of individuality remains intact for the main characters, all the actors are joined by a rhythmic (seemingly involuntary) body tic that they repeat together on a constant beat.

This communal display is sometimes itself the action, sometimes the background for the mating ritual initiated during the carnival. In dialogue Akalaitis labels scene 3

<sup>31</sup> In his interview, Bayes stressed the sexual energy of the dance.

<sup>32</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 1968), 7. I am aware, as Robert Cunliffe has detailed, that there is often, in Bakhtin, an opposition of carnival and drama; for example, Bakhtin suggests that theatre's footlights are antithetical to true carnival. As Cunliffe goes on to show, however, the relationship between Bakhtin's concepts of participation in carnival and in drama is not so simply oppositional. See "Charmed Snakes and Little Oedipuses: The Architectonics of Carnival and Drama in Bakhtin, Artaud, and Brecht," in *Bakhtin Carnival and Other Subjects*, 48–69.

<sup>33</sup> The focus on music and sound throughout the production is characteristic of other Akalaitis productions; see Susan Letzler Cole, "JoAnne Akalaitis directs *The Voyage of the Beagle*," in *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 76–88.



Figure 2. From the opening carnival: Hellena (Elizabeth Marvel) and Willmore (Don Harvey) confer. Guthrie Theatre production of *The Rover*. Photo: Michal Daniel.

(Behn's 1.2), the audience is, for a time, asked to focus on the main lovers—Hellenia and Willmore, Florinda and Belvile, Valeria and Frederick—and witness their initial expressions of attraction. But their heterosexual love (scripted by Behn) is played against a multiplicity of desires (directed by Akalaitis) as couples almost randomly fondle one another throughout the carnival mass—men with women, women with women, men with men. Boundaries of gender and sexuality are permeable.

One can't forget, however, that all of the flirting and flitting, the verbal and visceral action, takes place in, beside, along, and through Akalaitis's scrim. Complete with its regular, ovoid, vaginal slits, the scrim divides this swirl of action and sound in an inscrutable way. Speaking characters are sometimes together on the same side of the scrim (and then appear as shadow figures to the half of the audience on the other side), sometimes separated by the taut red cloth. I could find no discernible or dependable pattern to explain the flow of voice and action—it threatened (or promised) chaos. Actor Christopher Bayes finds the scrim a defiling of the thrust stage at the Guthrie, a defilement that "breaks everything," makes "everything open to reinterpretation."<sup>34</sup> I find his description accurate, for the bright red of the scrim is a visual affront, always blocking the view of something or someone (no matter where a member of the audience sits), increasing the anxiety that one has only a partial view of events. It makes the carnival tense, not relaxing. In other words, at the same moment she valorizes the vibrant excesses of her carnival, Akalaitis also fragments it. The scrim seems to pose questions to which an articulate answer is impossible.

This opening Gypsy carnival soon dwindles to a more focused attention on Angellica Bianca (Akalaitis's scenes 5 and 6), but not before the experience has opened characters and audience alike to the chaos of the carnival. All share a liminal space in which there are no givens, no expectations, no templates. This assault on social as well as theatrical conventions is not isolated to the actual carnivals, however, but, in fact, permeates every aspect of this production. For example, the programs come with red cardboard fans the audience is encouraged to wave during performance. In the lobby, bright red phones labeled "Aphra's Hotline" dangle and bob thirty feet down from the ceiling—any audience member can pick one up to hear bits of Behn's poetry and writings as well as musings on Behn's feminism and sexuality. Audience members enter the theatre to a cacophonous mixture of music and sound—irregularly alternating among classical music, new age soundscapes, and the impatient ticking of a clock (this sound also marks important moments in the play proper). And the onstage audience is dressed in red and black hats and wraps which make them (during performance) a part of the red and black set, and later render them (during the interval, as they become part of the audience stretching its legs in the lobby) walking reminders that stage and house are not fully separable. Such details are indicative of the encompassing ways in which this production takes the defiance of its carnival beyond the stage.

While in many ways her first carnival seems designed to encourage community, the cumulative effect is to prohibit any stable definition of community either onstage or off. For the audience, the carnival is alluring at the same time it is vaguely repulsive. And audience members receive mixed signals—Blunt will invite them to share a joke

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Bayes.



Figure 3. From the second carnival, with the scrim visible. Guthrie Theatre production of *The Rover*. Photo: Michal Daniel.

one moment and they will be excluded by stone-faced celebrants brushing by them the next. For those in the cast as well as those who had paid to be present, individuality could not be preserved during participation in the group and, at the same time, there was no guarantee of inclusion.<sup>35</sup> These festal communities were, in other words, both desirable and unattainable.

The three subsequent carnivals in the production continue the open mix of desire, music, movement, costume, and community but in notably different ways. Akalaitis's second carnival, an oriental carnival, offers new costumes and colors and more body (see fig. 3). The carnival occurs just after Akalaitis's scene 7, the long love-declaration between Angellica Bianca and Willmore, so it seems in some ways a development of that scene's mixture of licit and illicit love. For example, the increasing boldness of the three sisters is visible in their more revealing dress: they have blooming harem pants, halter tops, and bare feet. They are also attentive to physical expressions of desire, as they ogle the couples embracing all around them: Hellena especially is visibly hungry for a language in which to express physically what she is now feeling for Willmore; Lucetta and Sancho are in a long passionate embrace; Sebastian and Biskey neck on the staircase; and late in this second carnival, Florinda joins such expressions, swaying

<sup>35</sup> Akalaitis also marked the bruising nature of communal borders in her multi-racial cast by including African American, East Indian, and Filipina players among her predominantly European American cast. Akalaitis cast an African American woman as Angellica Bianca, but had sought to cast, as Kathleen Dimmick put it in her interview, a much more "aggressively multi-racial cast" than she was able to.



suggestively to the music. Besides being more sexual, this carnival is also more threatening. Late in the carnival, Angellica Bianca's bravos leave their kiss for the purpose of surveillance, recording on their cameras what suddenly seem to be illicit acts. While this celebration opens with giant fan-like butterflies expanding in the air above the actors, it ends with suspicion and is followed by hints of what Bakhtin would label "degradation."

The third and fourth carnivals come after the interval and are part of the darkening vision of the production's second half. The third carnival, for example, opens the action after the interval and stands most notably as an ominous gateway to the first attempted rape of Florinda. There is a primitive feeling to this ritualized celebration—Akalaitis calls it a "bestial carnival."<sup>36</sup> It begins with rumbling ocean sounds, a change in neon lighting (from red to white), and the numbed, orderly entrance of the cast from two opposing points, at either end of the scrim. As Dimmick suggests, there is a clear echo of the opening flamenco procession. The women are in long white gowns, many of the men are in loin cloths, feather, and fur, and all engage in a more closely choreographed and boldly sensual mating dance. As if to emphasize this carnality, the female curves and openings of the red scrim play against the billowing pink penises still up from the interval. This carnival allows for direct expressions of sexual desire but also manifests that desire as ritual, dominance, and, eventually, violence. An individual's control over his or her sexuality is threatened by the possibility of rape, a rape somehow sanctioned by the physical license of the celebration.<sup>37</sup>

The final carnival follows scene 15, in which Angellica Bianca, Hellena, and Willmore negotiate the ticklish complications of their love triangle. Angellica Bianca exits, bemoaning her loss of Willmore's affection, and Hellena follows, exiting in a slow-motion pursuit of Willmore, moving as if her attraction is magnetic, involuntary. This schematizing of the play's main relationships fades into the grime and slime of the final entropic carnival. The celebrants have lost their color and are now clothed in shades of black and white; a group of supernumeraries Dimmick refers to as "the mud people" slink about on stage clinging to the scrim, listening, watching, and threatening the more innocent contingent of Hellena, Valeria, and Florinda. These three are dressed as nymphs with "long heads of hair," gaudily unnatural in their goldish color.<sup>38</sup> Many on stage are masked, but it is not just faces that are mutable: other grotesque possibilities are explored in cone-headed people and misshapen bodies. A threatening music sets a dark tone and is enhanced by the opening of hellish smoke-filled holes in the stage floor.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Dimmick.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Russo makes a direct connection between rape and carnival: "in fact, as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie shows in *Carnival at Romans*, Jews were stoned, and there is evidence that women were raped, during carnival festivities. In other words, in the everyday indicative world, women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive—dangerous, and in danger" (217). In the Guthrie program, this attention to the cultural underpinnings of rape is stressed through inclusion of a 1989 Associated Press report about a Florida rape trial ("From Myth to Mardi Gras," *Guthrie Program Magazine*, 29). See also Heidi Hutner ("Revisioning the Female Body," 111) who analyses the way rape "undermines the moral code that marriage supposedly embodies."

<sup>38</sup> *The Rover*, version compiled by JoAnne Akalaitis and Kathleen Dimmick, 87.

It is a bacchanalia gone sour, a carnival reduced to communal frenzy and unrestrained sexuality. Any audience member tempted to participate in the early revelry will be repulsed by this eerie congregation. The carnival liberates its celebrants from the constraints of their everyday life, but also puts them—here the audience as well—in contact with the dark abysses of that liberty. That darkness is intensified by events to follow. For it is as if this final carnival draws on a degeneration of the entire action: as the carnival participants creep out, as the smoke clears, the audience watches a transformation of the set that will be permanent; the lights come up with the glare of a florescent bulb. As the scene changes to Blunt's quarters, the stage becomes a gritty landscape of urinals, toilets, bathtubs, and sinks. The porcelain is dirty and broken, some pieces painted in lurid colors.<sup>39</sup> And in this vaguely male world of elimination, Florinda faces her second rape, this one a gang rape. Community is demonized.

These four carnivals focus the audience on the transformative qualities of celebration, particularly the mutating nature of desire.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the most striking quality of this full carnivalizing of Behn is the way in which men's and women's experiences are distinguishable. Behn's Englishmen are, in Akalaitis's vision, "tough, biker-type guys" who don black leather to accentuate their virility and mobility.<sup>41</sup> For them the freedoms of carnival are a welcome but familiar means of roving from diversion to diversion; carnival is a feast of sensual pleasures of which they can fully partake. Carnival offers them an extension of the privileges and freedoms they possess in a patriarchal society. For the Spanish sisters, however, the experience of carnival is a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, they are allowed entrance into a previously unavailable world of desire and agency. On the other hand, the possibilities opened up to them are both limited and dangerous. Most importantly, their identity is dangerously fluid and their virginity is under constant threat. Akalaitis's costuming most dramatically underlines the way carnival exposes the fragility of female agency.

For the men, changes in dress (which are usually subtle and partial) suggest the range of masks and roles available to them. The men are occasionally "decorated," as Willmore is after his lovemaking with Angellica Bianca, but they are rarely reduced to visual objectification.<sup>42</sup> For the women, however, costuming becomes a barometer of the coupling between carnival degeneration and sexual objectification. As noted above, the three women are recostumed for each of the four carnivals, becoming primary markers of the darkening celebration as well as the increasing visibility of the flesh. Yet the revealing of their bellies and legs, then (briefly) nipples and buttocks, is less connected to sexual liberation than to the objectification they will not be able to avoid at the end of the play. In this production, the women seek sexual freedom and social empowerment, both of which are soundly denied them. More importantly, the romp through carnival does not authenticate their grasping at identity as much as it

<sup>39</sup>In his interview, Bayes reported that Akalaitis also wanted to roll out white linoleum over the stage to accentuate the YMCA-boys-shower-land image.

<sup>40</sup>As Bakhtin puts it, "the carnival attitude possesses an indestructible vivacity and the mighty, life-giving power to transform" (*Problems*, 88).

<sup>41</sup>Akalaitis, "From the first Rehearsal," 24.

<sup>42</sup>The farcical treatment of Don Antonio comes the closest to portraying one of the men as a figure of commodification. He is dressed throughout as a fop to underscore his lack of the raw virility the Englishmen possess.

inhibits it.<sup>43</sup> For Hellena, Florinda, and Valeria's conscription in a system of marriage and property is reemphasized in their costuming for their final entrance. As they rush on to claim their men in marriage, the three are outfitted in veils as well as virginal, white, mini-skirted dresses. They are trembling with adolescent glee. For the three women, Akalaitis's carnival cannot be read as a liberating romp though it appears to be so at times; the play ends, rather, with a chilling exposure of patriarchal hierarchies of power.

While Hellena, Florinda, and Valeria are framed between the heady lawlessness of carnival and the predictability of marriage, Akalaitis's Angellica Bianca destabilizes the divisions between male and female emphasized by carnival. As so many critics of Behn have noted, Angellica Bianca's presence in the play complicates the movement toward marriage and convention. She is a counter-presence to the virginal allure and conventional choices of the sisters, actively claiming a position of sexual knowledge and power without institutional sanctioning. Akalaitis marks such independence in costuming: while Hellena, Florinda, and Valeria share their excursions in costuming, Angellica Bianca's certainty and individuality are marked by flashy clothing not tied to the fluctuations of carnival but rather to the timing of her own desire; she ranges from a silver body suit to a gold trench coat with matching platform heels to a simple gold shift and bare feet. The dark skin of African American Viola Davis, the actor playing Angellica Bianca, also singles her out in this predominantly European American cast. While the carnival surrounds her, Angellica Bianca remains notably outside of its accelerating ascents and descents. Carnival is, in fact, superfluous to Angellica Bianca; she does not need its liberty to claim her own.<sup>44</sup> Akalaitis is clearly attracted to the way Angellica Bianca interrupts orthodoxy and refuses its mandates. She takes on particular importance in Akalaitis's production because she is never easily categorized or included. Her daring presence inhibits any simple reading of the inversions of carnival and engages the audience in negotiating the conflict between individual freedom of desire and the dictates of the community.

### Anti-carnival

Dimmick describes the dark sewer world into which Blunt is tossed at the end of scene 10, and out of which he rises—with the wasteland plumbing of scene 17—as a “primeval muck,” an “anti-carnival” of unrefined, naked passion.<sup>45</sup> In this grimy landscape, Blunt dissociates himself from the coupling of his friends, as he develops a rationale for misogyny and violence. His alterity is now distinct from that of the lovers cavorting in carnival; thus, along with Angellica Bianca, he negotiates a significant alternative to binary alternations between orthodoxy and carnival. Indeed, Akalaitis relies on the dark playing of Blunt to measure out a fuller range of possibilities for cultural transgression than carnival allows. Around him gather the pieces of another

<sup>43</sup> See Elin Diamond's analysis of Behn's changes in costume (527). Diamond emphasizes how female desire is a perpetual masquerade. Catherine Gallagher is not focused on costuming, but details the same absence of female identity in Behn.

<sup>44</sup> Insightful analysis of Angellica Bianca's forceful presence in the play can be found in Diamond, Hutner (“Revisioning the Female Body”), Copeland (“‘Once a whore and ever’”), De Ritter, and Joseph F. Musser Jr., “‘Imposing Nought But constancy in Love’: Aphra Behn Snares *The Rover*,” *Restoration* 18 (1994): 77–87.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Dimmick.

alternative “domain,” another site of transgressive discourse.<sup>46</sup> In the end, the rumblings of Blunt’s anti-carnival highlight the tenuous hold all of the characters have on their own actions and desires.

As the production opens, Blunt cavorts as a clown, recognizably laughable in his garish red and orange clothes, his unrefined talk, and his gullibility. Deftly played by Christopher Bayes, he is a lightning rod for the laughter generated in the early scenes (see fig. 4). His role changes dramatically after his duping by Lucetta and Sancho; and when he rises from the humiliation of their treatment, he is no longer an engine of comedy but a deeply hurt man single-mindedly seeking revenge. Dressed in the only clothes left for him—Lucetta’s cast off slip—he dominates the final segments of the play by corrupting laughter and disrupting audience response.

The scene of Blunt’s reentry into the play (scene 17, Behn’s 4.1) is also the scene of the second attempted rape of Florinda, a scene in which Blunt leads the other men in a brutal violation of social code. Vowing to revenge against all women his cruel treatment by Lucetta, Blunt appropriates Florinda as his initial victim, quickly drawing Frederick, Belvile, Willmore, and Don Pedro into a gang rape. While Belvile recognizes that his love Florinda is the victim here, the others are happily ignorant of her identity, caught up in the lure (and later frenzy) of sexual domination. Frederick threatens her with his knife; the men toss her about physically, ripping her clothes and exposing her breasts and buttocks; and they synchronize their violent energy by joining in a ritual clapping during the chase. Akalaitis stages an ugly scene in which the men are not absolved from blame; neither is the audience, for perhaps the most disturbing part of the brutality is actor Bayes’s manipulation of audience response. Just when the audience was ready to respond with a laugh to some comic aspect of Blunt’s chase, Bayes would shift gears, revealing Blunt’s vicious intent and, thereby, stifling laughter.<sup>47</sup> Bayes reports that at each performance, he could feel the audience members wanting to relax again into their easy laughter at the clown, but instead found themselves being shocked into a sobering recognition of sexual abuse. The primary effect of Blunt’s anti-carnival is to highlight the intimidating animalistic side of the men’s desire for women. The audience is forced to partake as unwilling voyeurs.<sup>48</sup>

Almost as soon as this dark scene reveals such misogynistic violence, the attempted rape is interrupted by Valeria’s cleverness, and three marriages quickly materialize on stage. The juxtaposition of the two contradictory moments is disconcerting, a demonstrable sign of Behn’s (and Akalaitis’s) recognition that the “happy ending” of marriage is a dangerous compromise. But the anti-carnival is not negated by such predictable comic community. The three main couples are now, indeed, relegated to what they have been seeking—the protections and privileges of marriage. But Blunt

<sup>46</sup> See Stallybrass and White, 19, 26, 194.

<sup>47</sup> Bakhtin writes that “The laughter of carnival is itself deeply ambivalent” (*Problems*, 104). Bayes’s position in the dynamics of audience response allows him to highlight the range of comic response in this production.

<sup>48</sup> In his interview, Bayes reported that during post-performance discussions, many audience members complained about the depiction of rape. They were generally uneasy with their implication in the process.

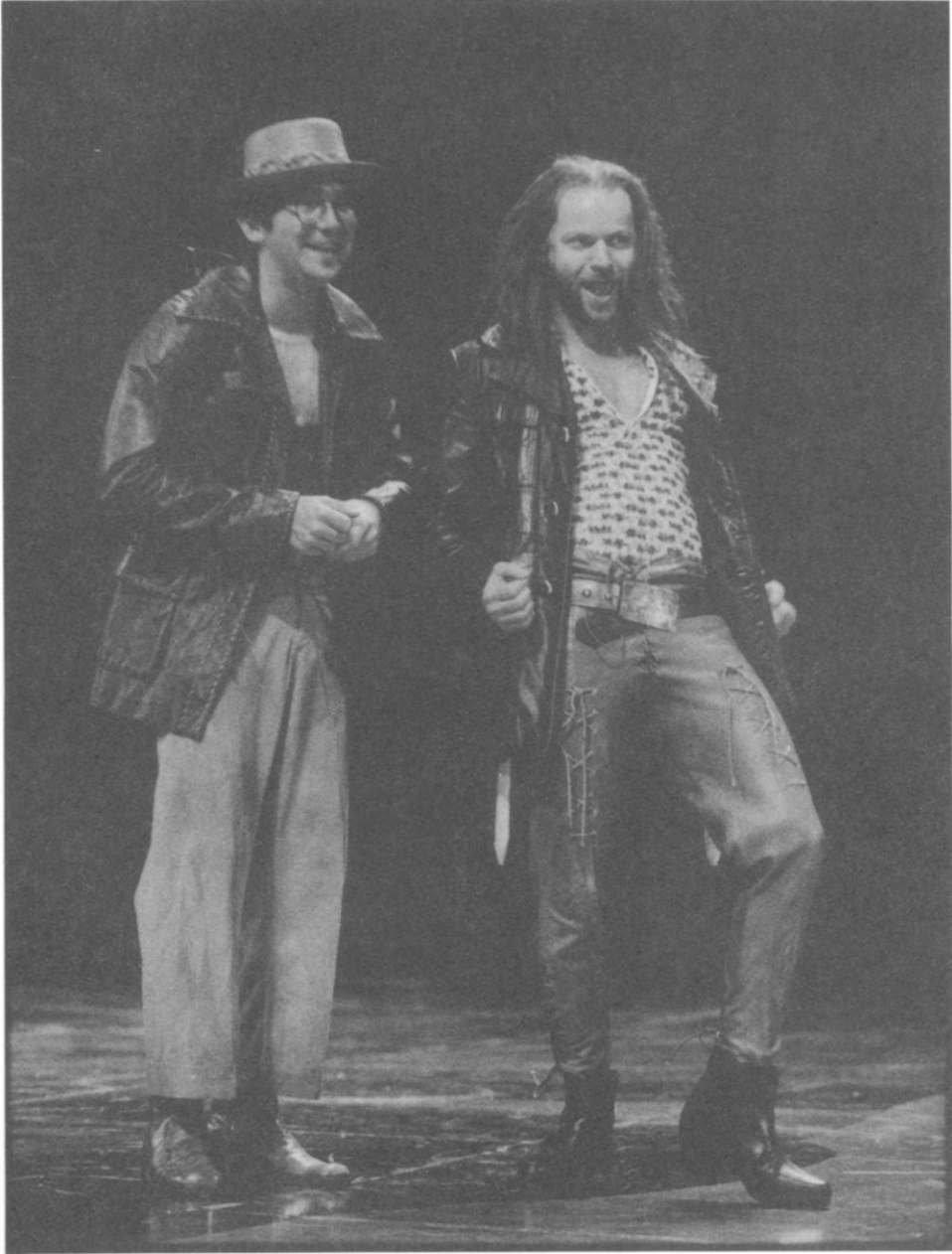


Figure 4. Blunt (Christopher Bayes) and Frederick (William Francis McGuire) in an early scene. Guthrie Theatre production of *The Rover*. Photo: Michal Daniel.

remains notably uncoupled, out of place both visually—his final entry is in Restoration dress!—and emotionally. He ends up framed in neon lighting, isolated and horrified by what's happened even as he tries to fit in.<sup>49</sup> His isolation is congruent with the production's final transformation, unalterably out of carnival and social positioning and into Lent.

Following Barton's lead, Akalaitis ends her production not on the unions of marriage but on the dark promise of Lent. The celebrating lovers are interrupted by a line of cone-headed monks with candles and crosses. The oddly shaped figures in the penitential procession bisect the stage, providing a human scrim to divide and freeze the action. I cannot claim that Akalaitis makes a direct connection between the interruptive anti-carnival of Blunt's experience and the intrusion of the foreboding religious ritual, but she releases her audience to the darkness of both. Akalaitis ends her production not with the teleology of comedy's promised marriages but with the omnipresence of sin.

### Stylization

With both carnival and anti-carnival, Akalaitis stages the unstable nature of desire, individuality, and community. But in her efforts to bring *The Rover's* world to us and our world to *The Rover*, she never erases the gap between the seventeenth century and the twentieth. With a series of strategies I group together under the rubric of "stylization," she frames her production as an uneasy, necessarily formal dialogue between two eras embroiled in issues of gender politics.

At several moments during the play, the contemporized action halts and the characters on stage (almost always the lovers and their retinue) share a ritualized movement which foregrounds the contradictions between seventeenth- and twentieth-century lovemaking. Alerted by the ticking of a clock, the actors change their carriage, rising into an erect, aristocratic pose, and then, with one arm extended and flexed at the wrist and with one foot pointed, they go through a series of synchronized movements of hands, heads, and feet. The movements are stylized versions of common Restoration poses in which the dangling of handkerchiefs and the displaying of calves dominates.<sup>50</sup> Such actions seem to throw the twentieth-century characters into a time warp in which they then assume—for a limited time—new vocalizations and physical poses. Dimmick refers to the clipped vocal delivery and more formal acting as a "quotation of Restoration acting." These movements set off and emphasize moments in Behn's text which Akalaitis found particularly intense, dated, or linguistically filigreed.<sup>51</sup>

These repeated tropes are present from the first entry of the Englishmen and their future lovers in scenes 1 and 2, and while an audience may not fully comprehend the movements, such actions nevertheless demand a self-consciousness of all the action. The most extended use of the quotation occurs at the most difficult ideological juncture of the play—when, in scene 18, the action moves from a menacing gang rape

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Angellica Bianca is not on stage at the end, having made her ambiguous departure in scene 19. Blunt's final moments recall hers in being variously interpretable.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Dimmick.

to multiplying marriages. This sizzling moment is, as Dimmick suggests, “a pretty interesting juxtaposition of violence and brutality followed by very highly stylized Restoration moments where all is forgiven and forgotten.”<sup>52</sup> The cumulative effect of such staging is, indeed, to highlight the distance between a seventeenth-century English and a twentieth-century American culture. These explorations of temporal and cultural difference are common enough to demand of the audience an awareness of the constructed quality of the lives in both centuries.

Such kinetic stylization is also dominant at other times when the audience is reminded of the production’s collage of cultures. Many of these moments are variations on the choreographed quotations of Restoration movement. Callis, for example, often expresses herself in a language of foot-stomping (since she is rarely scripted in the text), echoing the energy of the initial flamenco as well as the gravity of the more stylized taps. Don Antonio and Don Pedro also draw from the emphatic flamenco to tap their way out of several scenes. The fancy footwork of Callis, Don Antonio, and Don Pedro is, of course, comic, part of the farcical treatment of Spanish culture throughout the production; other variations on stylized motion are darker. As I noted above, during the first carnival, the entire onstage cast share a rhythmic body tic, writhing together to an unexplained beat. When he reenters the action after his duping, Blunt has developed a variation on this tic, an involuntary shudder that contorts his whole body, marking, as Bayes notes, a “psychotic, manic” version of the super-civilized Restoration tap.<sup>53</sup> All of these stylized movements, comic or otherwise, bear traces of this production’s self-consciousness of community dynamics.

The abstract dimension of such synchronized playing is most pronounced in two scenes—both focused on Angellica Bianca—where negotiations of love are conducted with an overlay of hierarchy and ritual. I found both a stunning indication of the powerful combination of Akalaitis’s twentieth-century vision and Behn’s seventeenth-century social matrix. In Behn’s original 2.2—where Angellica Bianca and Willmore create the terms of their love—some of the play’s most elevated language contributes to a scene of passionate linguistic foreplay. In Akalaitis’s version (scene 7), the connection between the two characters is predominantly physical: Willmore and Angellica Bianca seduce one another, rejecting various accounts of sexual commodification in the lean text that accompanies their actions. The tactile encounter is central, marked by Angellica Bianca’s physical strength: she’s muscular and taller than Willmore; she hoists him up by grabbing his buttocks; and she initiates their shared strip. But significantly, all of this recognizable late-twentieth-century sexualized action is abstracted through a line of seven chairs, diagonally positioned across the stage. There is an odd assortment, some painted, some upholstered, all ranging in color from white to blue to pink. In, among, and around this line, the two characters approach each other. The effect is to formalize the encounter, to emphasize the lack of individual control, and to recall the opaque divisions of the scrim.

In scene 15 (Behn’s 4.2.126–end), Akalaitis modifies the gesture, having members of the cast replace the chairs; they stand in a line as, this time, the negotiations of love involve not only Angellica Bianca and Willmore but also Hellena, Moretta, Sebastian,

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Bayes.

and Biskey. A game of positioning, a formalized leap-frog, dominates the scene; and in a dance choreographed by the words of the text, Hellena makes a lasting claim to Willmore, while Angellica Bianca finds herself marginalized. Both scenes 7 and 15 replay the production's focus on the power of community by abstracting its presence. And in all of her stylizations, Akalaitis not only foregrounds the 300 years that separate us from Behn but also uses the gap to mark ways our culture maintains its stake in both communal and individual acts.

### **Behn looking at us**

Akalaitis takes a popular Restoration comedy of intrigue, strips it to a skeleton of words, and redresses it with a lush and penetrating swirl of celebration, stylization, and violence. It is ample proof of Behn's theatrical staying power in a late-twentieth-century theatre of self-consciousness and theorized difference. Both in its rearrangements of text and its enhancement of the visual, Akalaitis's production clearly demonstrates that Behn's play is an exercise in possibility, not a meting of judgment. Behn does not condemn Angellica Bianca's free sexuality, Willmore's rapacious desires, Hellena's naiveté, or Blunt's revenge, but she makes all of them possible. And in bringing such possibilities to life, Akalaitis creates a production memorable for its complex creation of a community and its individuals, its dark reading of marriage and desire, and its aggressive gestures to the audience.

As Akalaitis predicts, Behn *is* looking at our world in this production, and while she can wisely comment on it, she knows better than to judge it.