was securely held throughout; interspersing the musical items with pertinent readings selected from Anna Beer's book was an excellent and engaging way of placing an unfamiliar program in its musical, cultural, and political context. The event, which marked the 400th anniversary of the official approval by Cosimo II de' Medici of Francesca Caccini's *Il primo libro delle musiche*, was a worthy and altogether enjoyable celebration of the composer's remarkable achievements.

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***Margaret Cavendish, Virginia Woolf, and the Cypriot Goddess Natura*. Written by James Fitzmaurice. Directed by Henry Bell. Produced by James Fitzmaurice and Michael Paraskos. Presented at Othello's Island Conference, Centre of Visual Arts and Research, Nicosia, Cyprus. April 8, 2017. Free.**

"This is totally anachronistic." So exclaims twenty-first-century PhD student, Joan, as she observes Constantijn Huygens, seventeenth-century philosopher, virtuoso Dutch scientist, and correspondent of Margaret Cavendish, complimenting Virginia Woolf on her lovely crush hat. The head-spinning anachronisms of James Fitzmaurice's *Margaret Cavendish, Virginia Woolf, and the Cypriot Goddess Natura* are one prominent means by which the production captures the wit, playfulness, and humor of Cavendish's own writings and stages an encounter, even a rapprochement, between Cavendish and Woolf, whose caustic critique still often frames scholarly conversations.

As the play opens, Joan confides to her friend, Melissa, an entry-level museum curator specializing in early modern history, her fears that in her dissertation on modernism and early twentieth-century literature, she is "slowly drifting into becoming an eternal PhD student." Commiserating with each other (and gently mocking the pushy male barista), Joan and Melissa discover a keen mutual interest: curiosity about the relationship of Virginia Woolf to Margaret Cavendish. Correcting Joan's tendency to refer to Cavendish as "Mad Madge" ("Nobody ever called her Mad Madge until after the time of Virginia Woolf"), Melissa observes that "As we both know, your girl, Virginia Woolf, said that Cavendish was a 'cucumber choking out all the roses.' What we don't know is why Woolf wrote so much about Cavendish. There was a fascination there." Joan expresses the thought

Figure 1. *Margaret Cavendish, Virginia Woolf, and the Cypriot Goddess Natura.* Left to right: Constantijn Huygens (Tom Cable), Virginia Woolf (Jessica Hakin), Joan (Morgan Reilly). Photo credit: Jim Fitzmaurice.

that the two young women seem to share: "I wish Woolf was here, so we could ask her." As if in one of Cavendish's own fantastical tales, Woolf then suddenly appears, and much of the rest of the play — through frequent exits and entrances, doubled roles, multiple switching of characters and time, and a profusion of witty banter and erudite allusion — pursues this question of the relationship between Woolf and Cavendish, with an eye toward understanding both better by seeing what they have in common.

Although (according to the script) "[i]n the basic actuality of the play, all scenes are in the Balthazar Café . . . but it develops into a salon during the time that Melissa and Joan become involved in imaginary conversations," from the perspective of the audience the space seems fully transformed from twenty-first-century café to seventeenth-century salon and back again, not to mention that at any given time, characters from different centuries are sitting and conversing at different tables, alongside and sometimes with one another. What is "real" and what is "imaginary" humorously and creatively blurs, as the characters vie for control of the same space and show self-awareness of their own fictional, imaginative, and shifting identities. Woolf (formerly the female barista) walks in, dressed smartly in a black velvet crush hat and 1920s-style short black dress (which Joan mocks

as fit for "a dinner party at Downtown Abbey"), and seats herself at an adjacent table. As the two younger women continue to speculate on Woolf's true feelings about Cavendish ("Cavendish started out as a nobody and ended up as a duchess. Duchess of Newcastle. Woolf plays the part of the above-it-all intellectual, but no intellectual even turned down a dinner invitation from a duchess"), Woolf suddenly breaks her pencil and addresses them directly. As Joan dutifully offers a pencil and sits down with Woolf, Huygens (formerly the male barista) enters, wittily conversing with Woolf ("Seems like it has been centuries since we last met"), and showing a distinctive penchant for womanizing by flirting with Joan. After Huygens insults Woolf as being "a fugitive from the middling classes," in contrast to the aristocratic Duchess of Newcastle, Cavendish herself appears, elegantly attired in a pale yellow gown with beaded bodice, gold ribbons, and white lace; she interacts only with Huygens, albeit improbably asking him (in barista mode) for a skinny latte. As Huygens and Cavendish converse, Woolf continues to voice class resentment to Joan: "You know what gives me apoplexy about these seventeenth-century aristocratic fine ladies? They have everything and do nothing to earn it." Maligning "Anne Finch, stinking Countess of Winchelsea," as having no good reason to be depressed, Woolf returns with sarcasm to Cavendish, "'my lady Newcastle,' the little upstart from Colchester."

As Cavendish reaches across tables and centuries to respond to Woolf's ironic comment about her burial ("So there she is all nicely done up in a tomb in Westminster Abbey"), other seventeenth-century characters enter the café: Elizabeth Chaplain (formerly Melissa), Cavendish's much-trusted waiting woman, and Beatrix de Cusance, Duchess of Lorraine (formerly Joan, but now aristocratically attired in an elegant turquoise gown, decorated with large jeweled flowers). A toadying John Evelyn (played by a female, who was earlier a café customer) and, later, his wife, Mary, jealous and suspicious, complete the cast of seventeenth-century characters who not only play word-puzzles and salon-style games, but converse on modes of written discourse, class distinctions, love, same-sex (or seemingly same-sex) relationships, the foibles of men, natural philosophy, and, above all, the realm of the Goddess Natura.

Acted with precision, energy, and expressiveness, the production kept a lively pace (undeterred by the actors reading their lines). Frequent exits and entrances, changes of costume and identity, and the actors exchanging places at the two table-sets or rising to give particular emphasis to important speeches kept the play moving at a quick pace, underscored by the quick and witty repartee.

The student actors (five women and one man from the University of Sheffield and from Sheffield Hallam University) put on an outstanding performance. One stand-out for her twinkling eyes and perfectly-timed sense of humor was Jessica Hakin in her role as Virginia Woolf. Tom Cable was a persuasively overconfident womanizer as both the male barista and Constantijn Huygens, while Lucy Morehen played a self-possessed and ironic Margaret Cavendish. Jessica Brown was a sprightly but obtuse John Evelyn, Emilie Philpott an angry Mary Evelyn and earnest Melissa, and Morgan Reilly an overworked Joan and a fun-loving Beatrix de Cusance.

Jim Fitzmaurice's impressive erudition, as well as his affection for and ability to laugh with Cavendish, was clear from multiple witty allusions and in-jokes. Hobbes, having declined to dine with Margaret, is dismissed as himself "short and nasty." Cavendish shows proud awareness of her own rank and burial ("Now that white marble tomb does look good . . . On the outside. But it is mighty crowded on the inside. Some of William's posterity invited themselves in."). When Elizabeth Chaplain, the maid, claims that she "would rather place a pistol to my breast" than drink a "gross pint-pot of ale," Margaret remarks to the audience: "She got that part about the pistol from my short story, 'Assaulted and Pursued Chastity.' Drama queen to the last."

The production playfully combines Cavendish's biography and fiction (especially drawing on her semi-fictional *Sociable Letters* from the Antwerp period). The play also reflects on, and even spoofs, the scholarly obsession with pinning down Cavendish's views on women, as Woolf (self-described as "the mother of feminism" although with "some bumps" in the road to "keep people awake") discusses with Beatrix de Cusance whether Cavendish is a feminist or a proto-feminist. After Cavendish voices some particularly negative comments ("Women. They can be so flighty. The wives especially. Horrible. Horrible women."), Woolf remarks on that considerable "road bump," while Beatrix labels the comments "More like a traffic barrier," concluding: "At least it makes the labelling of historical figures more interesting. Maybe we should refer to Cavendish as a 'proto-semi-feminist.'"

Nonetheless, the play wants to affirm connections between Woolf and Cavendish. Initially mocking the happy Cavendish marriage ("boring, boring, boring") and voicing class envy, Woolf surprises herself and Beatrice by wanting to tell her ("before you turn back into being Joan, the long suffering PhD student") a "little secret": "So here goes . . . Margaret Cavendish and I are so alike

that we could be sisters." Both, Woolf admits ingenuously, ramble and write a lot, perhaps too much. Both are taken at face value, when they should be read for the irony. Later, speaking directly to Cavendish, she proclaims, "My sister, our manifesto shall be: 'Always the possibility of Irony.'" But as Woolf then immediately exits ("On that note, I must make my way back to the twentieth century"), we have to wonder whether this affirmation of irony can itself be taken straightforwardly. Where does irony over the twists and turns of life end and imagination begin? On a beautiful night in Cyprus, Woolf and Cavendish found common if "totally anachronistic" ground, in a warmly-received production in which anything seemed possible.

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