

'Count Basil,' Rescued From the Archives

By [Peter Marks](#)

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Novelties from the 18th century show up a lot more frequently on "Antiques Roadshow" than on the Washington stage, so chalk up a rare collectibles coup for a local ensemble, Horizons Theatre, that specializes in works by and about women.

The company has brought to light a 205-year-old play, "Count Basil," by an obscure Scottish writer, Joanna Baillie. Horizons claims the drama, at Theatre on the Run, has never been performed before, not even in Baillie's own time. The piece, lovingly if somewhat aridly raised from the dead by director Leslie Jacobson, makes for an evening that tickles the fancies of doctoral candidates in dramatic literature. All others may find "Count Basil" the kind of event that needs to be experienced only for extra credit.

Baillie, who died in 1851, is an asterisk in the annals of English-speaking theater, a woman who penned serious dramas -- she wrote 27 -- at a time when the pursuit was prescribed for men. Though a few of her plays enjoyed popular success, many others went unproduced and were available only in published volumes; thus her limited renown as a "closet" dramatist. In recent years, companies celebrating female playwrights have rummaged through some pretty remote corners of the closet, even putting on works by a 10th-century Saxon nun by the name of Hrotswitha of Gandersheim.

"Count Basil," published in 1798, takes as its theme the ways in which a consuming passion manifests itself as a sign of both great character and intense weakness. The tale recounts the plight of a revered warrior, played by Eric Schoen, whose devotion to a princess, Victoria (Jessica Cerullo), softens his heart so thoroughly that he loses the will to wage war. That Victoria is an accomplished player of mind games does nothing to cool Basil's ardor. Nor will Basil be sidetracked by a duke (Catherine Aselford) and a courtier (Armand Sindoni) determined to use the count's distraction as a wedge between him and his men.

Schoen's Basil is a likable softy -- he turns to putty at each of the princess's entrances -- which makes the story's sensitive hero appealing and emotionally accessible. He's the production's best feature, especially good in a well-staged scene in which Basil faces down his mutinous troops and wins them back not with bluster but with reason. Cerullo has a tougher assignment, making sense of the unreadable Victoria; the performance is one that an audience is never quite able to warm up to. A couple of other, more eccentric casting decisions -- such as making the duke a woman -- accomplish nothing but the draining away of credibility.

Often there are reasons that a play molders in the archives. With "Count Basil," it's the leisurely development of plot and the repetition of theme, deficiencies that make it a sleeping pill. Jacobson has added some pleasant music by composer John Ward for her production at Theatre on the Run, and the costumes by William

Pucilowsky attractively plant the play in the realm of fairy tales. Still, this extreme example of a delayed opening does not offer "Count Basil" the promise of happily-ever-after.

Count Basil, by Joanna Baillie. Directed by Leslie Jacobson. Sets, Betty Beuck Derbyshire; movement, Karin Abromaitis; lighting, Carl F. Gudenius; sound, Maya Robinson. With Leigh-Erin Balmer, Cate Brewer, Colby Coddling, Caren Anton. Approximately 2 hours 15 minutes. Through June 29 at Theatre on the Run, 3700 S. Four Mile Run Dr., Arlington. Call 703-243-8550 or visit www.horizonstheatre.org.

Eric Schoen, above, plays a warrior and Catherine Aselford is, of all things, the duke in "Count Basil," also featuring, at left, Cate Brewer, Jessica Cerullo and Caren Anton.

 0 Comments

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Peter Marks joined The Washington Post as its chief theater critic in 2002. Previously, he worked for nine years at the New York Times, on the culture, metropolitan and national desks, and spent about four years as its off-Broadway drama critic.

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