

<p>important facet of a brave and notable success. ● <i>At Salisbury Playhouse Studio (0722 20333) until 16 September.</i></p> <p>Gate Theatre</p> <p>Michael Billington</p> <p>The Wonder</p> <p>I WAS intrigued to discover how popular Susannah Centlivre's <i>The Wonder</i>, currently being revived at the Gate, Notting Hill, by the Escapade Theatre Company, was in its day. My edition of <i>Who's Who in The Theatre</i> lists 41 revivals between the play's premiere in 1714 and a Crystal Palace production in 1875.</p> <p>Not that everyone warmed to Mrs Centlivre's farcical comedy. A crabby review in</p>	<p>The London Chronicle in 1758 accused her of plagiarism and incompetence ("the language is contemptible to the last degree"), and observed, "How she came to have the good luck to get her plays acted, I own, I am at a loss to determine, unless it was by Court interest."</p> <p>The truth is that <i>The Wonder</i> is a noisily actable, neatly-plotted affair far more interesting for its sexual politics than for any stylistic flourish. Writing at the end of Queen Anne's reign, Mrs Centlivre unequivocally shows women on top. Even in the male-dominated world of Restoration Comedy, you frequently find sharp-witted women out-vying men for supremacy. But here they not only escape the shackles of a forced marriage or convent-life: they also ensure that the men don't get bed without wedlock and stick together with the molten fervour of Angela Brazil's teenage chums.</p> <p>Mrs Centlivre's setting is Por-</p>	<p>tugal. And the whole fantastic imbroglio depends on the fact that the heroine, Violante, is prepared to sacrifice her love for the furiously jealous Don Felix in order to protect his sister's honour: the wonder is that, as the sub-title has it, <i>A Woman Keeps A Secret</i>. Violante's vigilance involves endless shunning of people (particularly the rantipole Colonel Briton en route home from the Spanish Wars) into bedchambers and closets which immediately stokes Don Felix's suspicions. Looking at the four armorially-inscribed doors of Damian Doran's set, the penny suddenly dropped: Mrs Centlivre was actually a feminist predecessor of Ray Cooney and palpable disproof of my recent contention that no-one ever wrote a farce with a female protagonist.</p> <p>I wish Sue Flack's <i>Violante</i> made even more of this idea by adding a bit more farcical fluster to her undoubted dignity.</p>	<p>But Caroline Lynch's production (oddy prefaced by snatches of Glenn Miller leading you to expect modern-dress) is both handsomely accoutred and very decently acted. Christopher Eccleston as the jealous Don Felix is like an eternally exploding firework, Anna Mazzotti exudes downright determination as his liberty-seeking sister and Harry Burton has a nice swagger as the randy British Colonel (proclaiming the virtues of sex before marriage, he announces, in one of the play's few memorable lines, "I like to see my meat before I give thanks").</p> <p>Peppered with hymns to the British way of life, Mrs Centlivre's genial pop farce, in fact, proves something of noteworthy historical significance: that in the eighteenth century pronounced feminism could go hand in hand with profound political chauvinism.</p> <p>● <i>Gate, Notting Hill (229-0706) until September 23.</i></p>	 <p>Swagger: Harry Burton as the Colonel in <i>The Wonder</i></p>
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Billington on The Wonder

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