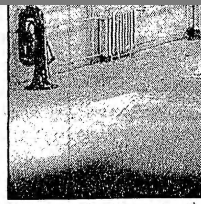


In Edward Bond's *Bingo* (1973), Shakespeare sat in his garden at New Place in Stratford in 1616, was harangued by his second daughter, Judith, and committed suicide. Peter Whelan, a milder, less dogmatic writer, moves round the corner to Hall's Croft where, in *The Herbal Bed*, Shakespeare's first daughter, Susanna Hall, wife of the physician John Hall, is struggling within an ice-cold marriage to progress from preparing 'comfort cordials' to making her own medical preparations. One of these, using lead plates, is a treatment for gonorrhoea - her father's.

Taking the bald facts of what we know about Susanna, Whelan concocts a riveting play of emotional complications, treachery and cross-examination, and of the importance of the gentle handling of the truth. The play is set in 1613, the year in which Susanna brought a charge of defamation against a neighbour, John Lane, in the diocesan court at Worcester. The slander was that she 'had the runings of the reynes [ie, the clap] and had been naughty [y] with Rafe Smith'.

According to her epitaph, Susanna was 'witty above her sex' and 'wise to salvation'. Whelan goes further, abetted by Teresa Banham's luminous performance. His Susanna is confidently acquiring her husband's alchemical and medical nous, while dealing with her illicit longing for Rafe, a local haberdasher. The couple meet in the herbal garden by night, fondle briefly, and this leads to the slander.

Whelan also proposes that John, here Jack, Lane (David Tennant, this season's excellent Touchstone), is a defeated admirer of Susanna and a spurned apprentice of her husband. The emotional thicket in



Off the wall: *Claustrophobia*

Michael Attenborough's fine production is further thickened by Susanna's servant, Hester (a love contribution from Jay McInnerny) being in lovesick thrall to Rafe, whom Joseph Fiennes makes a figure of scintillating hesitancy and innate decency with a troubled stoop and a weeping voice. 'My tongue's my dog,' confesses the dissolute Jack Lane.

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