

### *Stage Beauty* (Richard Eyre, 2004)

This is definitely a film for people who fancy Claire Danes. The less makeup she wears and the more she sweats, the sexier she gets, even though you can see a lump on the bridge of her nose when she's in profile, and her eyes aren't quite so big in relation to the rest of her face as they were when she did Juliet. She plays an aspirant actress at a time when there were no actresses; and whether she's acting good acting, acting bad acting, or just acting, you feel she's well within the limits of her technique. The invention and the detail are outstanding, and the English accent is as convincing as – well, as convincing as Kate Beckinsale doing American.



The movie is *Shakespeare in Love II*, or *Son of Shakespeare in Love*, even using Tom Wilkinson again as a hollow authority figure. There he was The Money – here he's The Actor Manager (Thomas Betterton). Just as *SiL* used the fiction whereby it was against the law for women to appear on the stage in the 1600s, so this uses the further fiction whereby it required another law (or rather, a Regal Fiat) to permit them to do so in the 1660s. As far as I know, neither law nor fiat existed in either case, just a taboo that was cast aside.



The film purports also to be an examination of acting, but hasn't the nerve to do it properly. Restoration acting, if reproduced accurately, would look so ridiculous that no-one would believe it – rather as no-one would have believed Nicole Kidman if she really had done an accurate Virginia Woolf impersonation in *The Hours*: “Nobody talks like that!” We hear Wilkinson / Betterton doing *It Is The Cause* from *Othello* in large, firm, round tones; we see Danes doing a Desdemona speech, as an audition, with Correct Gestures Depicting Female Emotion, and we see Billy Crudup as

Edward Kynaston giving Danes a demonstration of a series of those same Correct Gestures: but what little stage acting we get is normal – Crudup / Kynaston doesn't do the gestures in performance. In fact, Crudup isn't really very good at women, which, if dwelt on, would rather sink the plot: what little we get of him seems camp-comedic, so it's good we get so little.



And when at the end he and Danes do a super-realistic version of Othello murdering Desdemona, it's whispery and hysterical in a modern way that would only work on TV: one can't believe that the audience would be so enthralled and horrified by it, for in such a big theatre they'd not be able to hear it.

It's true that society ladies would insist on driving Kynaston through the park as long as he kept in drag, and it's also true that Charles II was told that the show was late going up because Desdemona was still shaving. Whether the ladies asked permission to assess Kynaston's masculinity while driving round the park, I don't know: I thought they would have driven in an open-top carriage, so as to be seen with him. And whether his skill at cross-dressed thesping affected Kynaston's sexuality, we don't know – but the idea makes for an interesting psychological conflict. In the film, Kynaston is uncertain whether he's masculine or feminine. He's into a homoerotic thing with the Duke of Buckingham, and Buckingham dismisses him with the information that he'd always thought of Kynaston as a woman. Meanwhile Danes fancies (a) Kynaston but (b) his job; so their relationship operates via attraction and antagonism, and ends with Kynaston (a) playing Othello and *almost* killing her but (b) *almost* coming out as hetero after he's done so.



Rupert Everett as Charles II and Zoe Tapper as Nell Gwynn

I've never been a fan of Richard Eyre's films. *Tumbledown* had its moments, especially when Colin Firth was in close-up; but *The Ploughman's Lunch* and *Laughterhouse* were neither as analytical on the one hand nor as celebratory on the other as they thought they were; and *Iris* was hamstrung by its refusal to show just how alienating the Murdoch / Bayley ménage could be in its lack of hygiene. Here, however, perhaps because the budget's bigger and the screen wider, Eyre directs with great flair and precision.

Rupert Everett and Zoe Tapper are fine as a parallel but more securely androgynous couple, King Charles and Nell Gwynne: the way they film the spaniels' reaction to Nell giving Royalty a blow-job is fun.