

Review of George Farquhar, *The Recruiting Officer* (The Donmar Warehouse, London, 21 February 2012)

In the eighteenth century, military recruitment and courtship apparently had a lot in common. Flattery, strategy, tricks and half-truths (not to mention pecuniary incentives) were the stock in trade of recruiting sergeants and lovers alike, if George Farquhar's bustling comedy of 1706 is to be believed. And he should know: in a biography that echoes the plot of a stage comedy, he married a widow who was supposedly very rich, but when this turned out not to be the case his marriage broke down and he joined the army. He himself served as a recruiting officer in Shrewsbury, where *The Recruiting Officer* is set, before returning to his career as a playwright.

Farquhar's comedy was popular in the eighteenth century but is little performed today, so this new production by the enterprising Donmar Warehouse is very welcome. The director Josie Rourke has assembled a starry cast, many of whom will be familiar to viewers of British television. Some of them have form in a frock coat: Mackenzie Crook in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, and Mark Gatiss, who memorably played the Restoration villain Sir Nicholas Sheet-Lightning in 'The King's Evil' (the marvellously entitled film-within-a-film in *The League of Gentlemen's Apocalypse*).

The action of the play centres on Captain Plume (Tobias Menzies), who comes to town with his able deputy Sergeant Kite (Crook) to recruit for Marlborough's army. He is also hoping to court Silvia, whose cousin Melinda is the object of his civilian friend Worthy's affections. Worthy has a rival in another recruiter, the foppish Captain Brazen (Gatiss), who in turn is desired by Melinda's ambitious servant Lucy. Silvia's father is led to question the disreputable Plume's intentions towards his daughter, so sends her to the country. But she returns disguised as a man to pursue Plume and test his constancy, and he promptly recruits her for his regiment.

Cross-dressing was of course a familiar device to Restoration audiences, and requires rather more of a leap of the imagination today. As the century went on, the figure of the 'female soldier' would repeatedly appear on the stage and the story of a woman disguising herself to follow her military lover was a recurring one in popular culture. Silvia's disguise leads to predictable misunderstandings: Plume is apparently taken with his new recruit and addresses him in the language of intense male friendship, offering to 'lie with' him. Today this has homosexual overtones that it might not have done at the time; here, it is played in a similar spirit to Lord Blackadder's confused attraction to his servant 'Bob' in *Blackadder II*.

It is perhaps significant that the female lead has to disguise herself as a man in order to get in on the action. More than most, this play is all about the men. As we might expect, fine ladies exchange wordplay, servants scheme and wenches get duped – the female cast all act their socks off to make this material funny. Indeed, some of the humour is uncomfortably rakish to the modern ear. Jokes about ravishment, abandonment and bastardy are dashed off, but the realities for a woman in this period who 'went for a soldier' could, of course, be tragic.

The male leads here make the most of their far juicier parts. Menzies is louche and over-confident, whereas Gatiss is splendidly over the top. Plume and Brazen represent the poles of military masculinity: rakish on the one hand, and foppishly attached to fine uniforms and gallantry on the other. Both accusations were commonly levelled against soldiers in the

eighteenth century. To Georgian audiences, *Brazen* would have been a cautionary tale about the dangers of taking the niceties of refinement too far.

It is certainly clear that neither *Plume* nor *Brazen* really represent marriage material. Soldiers in the eighteenth century were symbolically bachelors, stuck in an immature stage of the male lifecycle: tellingly, the romantic plot can only resolve if *Plume* becomes marriageable by incongruously resigning his commission and becoming a country gentleman. By the end of the play, the civilian leads are married whereas the military ones aren't (at least, not legally so). Indeed, *Brazen* trades his marital ambitions for twenty recruits!

The scenes where *Plume* and *Kite* use their wiles to entice recruits are hugely enjoyable. *Menzies* and *Crook* do an excellent 'good cop, bad cop' routine, and use the full gamut of incentives to inveigle the local men, including promises of bounty, adventure, easy promotion and sexual allure. In particular, the bumpkins are drawn in by the promises of gentility that customarily went with a red coat – the military was one of the few genuine means of social mobility in eighteenth-century society. Farquhar leaves us in no doubt, however, that *Plume* and his ilk are not real gentlemen: soldiers are never quite what they seem. At one point, *Kite* disguises himself as a travelling fortune-teller in order to manipulate potential recruits: if recruiting sergeants have to pose as charlatans, Farquhar seems to be saying, it says little for the credibility of their promises.

These same themes of deception, sexual inconstancy, greed and social ambition apply equally to the romantic plots as to the recruiting ones. In this joyously cynical play, all is fair in love and war. All of the players approach the material with gusto, and the 150 minute running time whizzes by with no longueurs. The intimacy of the Donmar Warehouse adds to the fun – the audience surrounds the stage on three sides, and the players involve them in the action. The set is kept simple, with a painted screen lit by flickering candles, and no clunky stage props to hold things up.

Honourable mention should go to the band, who combine musical duties with various minor roles – including, crucially, the recruits upon whose gullibility much of the humour relies. The score by Michael Bruce really adds to the atmosphere and makes fine use of the traditional song 'Over the Hills and Far Away'. Farquhar reworked this romantic ballad into a song about an idealistic young recruit, and thereafter it was always associated with the military. The final rendition of this song is especially poignant: it hints at the melancholy reality of joining up, and is a fitting coda to a marvellous evening of silliness.