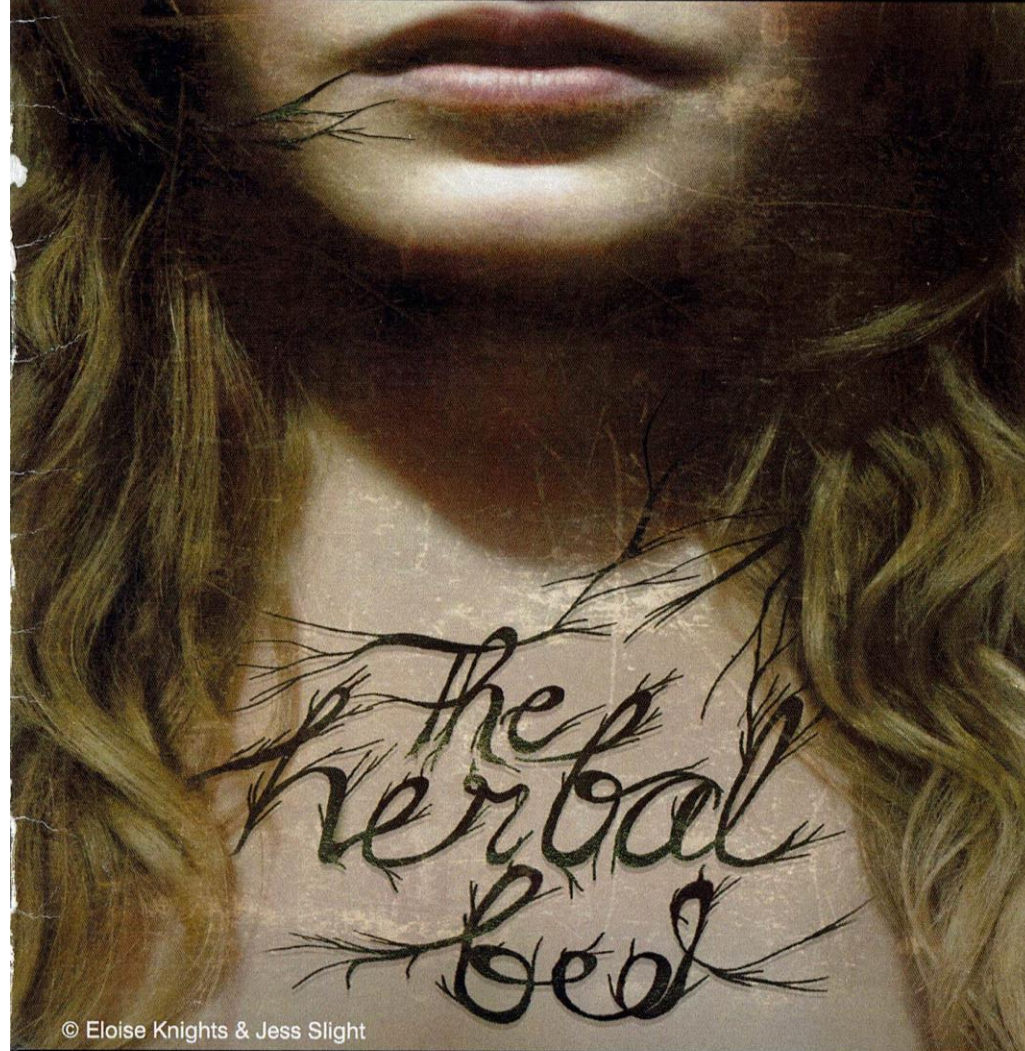




Stoke on Trent Repertory Players **£1**
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by Peter Whelan

26th, 27th & 30th April and 1st to 4th May 2013 at 7.30pm

Matinee: Sat. 4th May at 2.30pm

(An amateur production by arrangement with Josef Weinberger Ltd.)

The Cast

John Hall: James Freeman
Susanna Hall: Catherine O'Reilly
Elizabeth Hall:..... Amy Keen-Wicks
and Sofia Bond
Hester Fletcher:Angela Dale
Jack Lane: James King
Rafe Smith: Philip Milward
Bishop Parry:Brian Rawlins
Barnabus Goche:Steven Beattie

DIRECTED BY:
James Freeman
and **Sarah Stockdale**
DESIGNED BY:
Brian Hadley

The action takes place in the garden and dispensary of John Hall's house in Stratford-upon-Avon, and in Worcester Cathedral during the summer of 1613.

There will be a twenty minute interval between Act One and Act Two

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The Crew

Stage Director: **Richard Masters**
Set Designer: **Brian Hadley**
Stage Manager: **Bill Hancock**
Scenic Artist: **Brian Hadley**
Set construction: **Mike Adams, Aaron Bagnell,**
John Beeston, Adam Davis, Brian Hadley,
Bill Hancock, Peter Logan, Liam Smith,
Lewis Roberts, Stuart Campbell,
Tina Campbell, Alex Campbell
Lighting Design & Operation: **Malcolm Rushton**
Sound Design & Operation: **Mike Adams**
Props and Set Dressing: **Claire Barlow,**
Diana Bevan, Richard Masters
Costumes supplied by: **Birmingham Costume Hire**
Wardrobe: **Joy Rawlins**
Assistant Wardrobe: **Sylvia Wright**
Programme design: **Janet Smith**
Company Photographer: **Peter Croft**

Thank You To
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and
Happy Feet Performance Academy

**We are indebted to the St John Ambulance
Brigade, whose members attend all our
performances.**

Director's Notes

2013 is the 400th anniversary of a momentous year in the life of William Shakespeare. In the summer of 1613, King James was on the throne, the Church of England, as always, was rife with argument and it will be only a few years before bishops are out of favour and the Pilgrim Fathers leave Southampton for America. That is to say: we are a stone's throw from civil war. The Puritan faction was gaining ground in the Church of England, though the King had sided with the bishops and the "high church" party. Roman Catholics were highly suspect after the Gunpowder Plot, and morality was strictly enforced by the Church courts. 400 years on we're still all too familiar with the effects of religion applied in extremis.

A year after the first production of his last solo-authored play *The Tempest*, Shakespeare appears to be living in semi-retirement in Stratford-upon-Avon. There he will have received the devastating news that his beloved Globe Theatre had burnt down on June 29th, set on fire by a spark from a cannon used in the production of his co-authored *Henry VIII*.

But it must have been a real bombshell for Shakespeare when in the same month his married daughter Susanna was publicly accused of infidelity. The scandal would have been all the more serious because Susanna was married to the respected local doctor and herbalist, John Hall.

The Herbal Bed is the fruit of Peter Whelan's exploration of our 17th century archives. The play itself is based on real events. As Peter Whelan explains "It was the pain of the moral dilemma detectable behind this small handful of facts that drew me to write it." What we do know is that in 1583 Susanna Shakespeare was born the daughter of William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway and said to be her father's favourite. The name Susanna was highly unusual in a town like Stratford and was suggestive of Puritanism. As the Reformation swept England, it was becoming a growing custom to give children names with biblical origins. The only fact that most people know about her is that she was conceived before her parents were married. This has led to much speculation about the marriage of the 18-year old William to the 26 year old Anne Hathaway. Was it a "shotgun" wedding in which the unwilling groom was forced to marry an older woman he didn't really love, and was this the reason why he left Stratford? The name Susanna has links to meanings of purity and virtue, perhaps a message to the gossipers that despite being born perilously close to the wrong side of wed-lock, she was conceived in true love?

Cont...

Whatever the background, it's impossible to feel that Shakespeare didn't love his daughter. Fathers and daughters feature over and over again in loving relationships though they always have their ups and downs; Lear and Cordelia, for instance. Prospero and Miranda in *The Tempest* and especially in *Pericles*, written in the year Susanna's daughter and Shakespeare's only granddaughter Elizabeth was born.

Susanna married a man Shakespeare must have approved of, a well-known physician John Hall, respectable and a few years older than her. As a marriage dowry, a custom which by this time had fallen out of practice, Shakespeare gave Hall tracts of rentable land equivalent to 10 times the average salary of the time, no doubt allowing the Hall's to have their luxurious new home built in Stratford which still stands today as Hall's Croft.

We know a lot about Doctor Hall's practice which he recorded painstakingly in his Casebook. In an age when medicine was on a watershed between superstition and science, with a hefty dose of country folklore thrown in, some of his cures seem bizarre (involving spiders' webs and sliced radishes), others ahead of their time.

Hall was widely respected for his devotion to medicine which he seems to place above personal advancement. He twice refused a seat on the town council, on a third occasion he accepted to incur a fine for missing the regular meetings. He also preferred a fine to accepting a knighthood.

A doctor was a rare and important person in a community which lived in constant fear of disease. The plague killed up to 200 - one seventh of the population - in Stratford in the second half of the year of Shakespeare's birth and was still raging. It closed the theatres in London for four out of the first six-and-a-half of King James's reign, which could explain why Shakespeare was spending more time in Stratford. And if the plague didn't get you, the "pox" might. Venereal disease was rife. Although we can speculate that Will may have been somewhat less than faithful to his older wife Ann Hathaway, it is interesting to note that it is the theme of unfaithful wives and false accusations which is a recurring one in his later plays, such as *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*, as well as that of self-imposed exile in *Timon of Athens*.

Little else is known of the Hall's life. Susanna appears in a 1606 list of recusants for failing to receive Communion of Easter Sunday and in June 1613 John Lane, a local man, slandered her by claiming she "had been naught with Rafe Smith" at the house of John Palmer, that is she had committed adultery with him. Smith was a haberdasher, and the nephew of Shakespeare's close friend Hamnet Sadler. On 15 July the Halls brought a suit for slander against Lane in the Consistory Court at Worcester.

It is this episode which Peter Whelan has turned into this compelling play. Originally written for the RSC and performed by them between 1996 and 1998 in Stratford, London and on tour. The original production featured the then little-known David Tennant as Susanna's accuser Jack Lane.

The story is essentially about the contradiction between human desires and the social conventions and religious constrictions which seek to repress them. It also focuses particularly on the role of lies: the small ones which keep marriages together or protect families and even reputations, and then the big lies, which as the Susanna character in the play suggests, are based on the denial of one's own feelings and beliefs.

In an age where the role of women in society is one of servitude and little else, we are presented in *Susanna* with a character 'out of time' with the educational, occupational and moral constrictions she is expected to endure. It is Susanna's complex character that illuminates many of the central themes at work in the play. She is pragmatic where the convention is to be inflexible; neither sinner nor saint but a witty, highly intelligent self educated woman who seeks to explore her very humanity and its infinite faculties. In all this one cannot help feeling the author is reminding us whose daughter this woman is, and perhaps asserting, as Hamlet does, that there is nothing either bad or good, but thinking makes it so.

Another subject dealt within the play is the notion of honour. Contained within the eventual fate of the main characters there does seem to be a comment on the customs of the time. What price for the pursuit of honesty and justice in a largely hypocritical society?

Susanna and John Hall were executors of Shakespeare's will, and she inherited most of his property. Like her father, Susanna was buried next to her husband in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church, in 1649. Her gravestone contains the following epitaph, which says something about her character and her closeness to her father.

*Witty above her sexe, but that's not all
Wise to salvation was good Mistris Hall,
Something of Shakespeare was in that, but this
Wholy of him with whom she's now in blisse.
Then, Passenger, hast nere a teare,
To weepe with her that wept with all,
That wept, yet set her self to chere
Them up with comforts cordiall.
Her love shall live, her mercy spread,
When thou has't ner'e a tear to shed.*

Out of these few facts Whelan has created a highly enjoyable play which is both entertaining and truly rewarding when reflected upon.

James Freeman