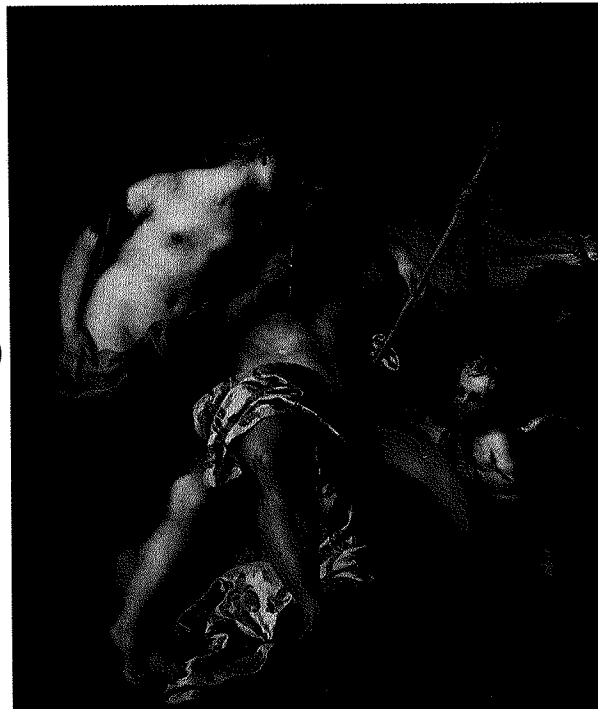


# WE ARE ALL STORYTELLERS

IN THEIR LATEST OFFERING, **THE ENGLISH THEATRE OF ROME** TAKE US INTO A WORLD WHERE MYTHOLOGY BECOMES SCIENCE, BOY BECOMES GIRL AND TIME HAS NO BEARING WHATSOEVER. TRF CATCHES UP WITH DIRECTOR **DUSTIN WILLS** TO TALK MOTHS, MYTHOLOGY, AND METAFICTION.

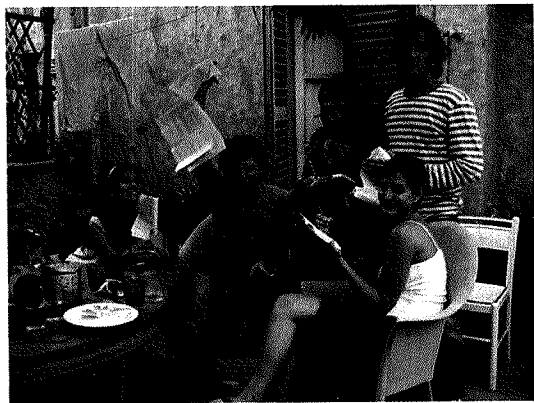


## Francesca Cookney

For over a decade the English Theatre of Rome has been providing the Eternal City's English-speaking community with cutting edge theatre and new writing. This September they present *The Moths*, a play they devised and wrote themselves under the direction of Dustin Wills. In anticipation of its opening this month, I went along to a rehearsal to meet the cast and chat about the creative process.

### ONCE UPON A TIME...

"Time, gender, writing... sexuality," director Dustin Wills reels off a few of the main themes, preempting my first question. He has a kind of contagious energy. At 24 years old he's already bursting with ideas and creativity and a genuine conviction about what he's doing. But let's go back to the beginning. Where did the idea for this play first originate? "Basically I went 'Right, I like this, I like this,'" he says holding up *Metamorphoses* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, "Let's do something with these." Naturally it is not as straightforward as that. The play draws heavily on Ovid, making particular use of the myths of Caenis/Caeneus and Daphne and Apollo. It takes the myth of the hero Herakles' sentence as a slave to the Lydian queen Omphale and turns it on its head. Caeneus is the son and heir of Omphale who, through his sexually ambiguous relationship with Herakles, discovers that 'he' is in fact a she. And if that wasn't enough, the whole thing unfolds before our eyes via the pen and ink of Virginia Woolf.



Photos:

The cast (below) grapple with the evolving script which takes the myth of Hercules and Omphale (depicted above in François Lemoyne's 1724 oil painting) as a starting point. The play is showing at the Arciliuto Thu/Fri at 9pm from 21 Sep thru 11 Oct

So where do moths come into it? To begin with, the name caeneus refers directly to a species of moth, the Indonesian *Delias caeneus* being one example. "The Moths" also links us to Virginia Woolf. An essay entitled "The Death of a Moth" was published posthumously by her husband Leonard and "The Moths" was also the original name she gave to what would later become *The Waves*.

### PENS AND PENCILS

The play was devised and written by the entire cast. Wills favours a technique he calls "free writing" which apart from anything else involves a ban on all word processors, only pens and pencils are allowed. This helps you write more fluidly, he explains, the point of 'free writing' being to "break down the internal judge," to allow yourself to write uninhibitedly, almost as a stream of consciousness. He also favours "non-writers," who have fewer preconceptions about their writing ability and as a result, find it easier to write freely, often producing clearer, less contrived results. The play itself echoes this idea as Caeneus attempts to relay to Herakles the story of Hero and Leander. "You're the storyteller. Not me," she protests. "We're all story tellers," he tells her. It sounds unpredictable but this is by no means the first time Wills has employed this method. *The Moths* marks the second in what he calls "The Herakles Trilogy" and this is also his second play with the English Theater, having received rave reviews for his *Ophelia* last season. The trick is in the compiling of the material. Once the initial 'free writing' process is over, they take the pile of papers and go through the material, selecting pieces they like and slowly building a story out of the tangle of ideas. As such, both the words and the story may be re-thought and re-written many times before the play is complete.

Even the writing process itself seems to draw on Woolf's *Orlando*. Wills may not have carried it round in his breast pocket for 300 years but the working and re-working of the play, the crossings out and scribbled-in margins, the patchwork of ideas and influences, all mirror Orlando's own writing of "The Oak Tree." And the process of writing is as important within the play as in its construction. The character of Virginia is seen throughout, building the story, selecting her words and those of her characters. The play unfolds as she writes it, her discarded sheets of paper littering the stage and blocking her own character, Caeneus', route to the truth. In the same way, *The Moths* was constructed by individuals who did not know its totality until it was written.

### SPOT THE REFERENCE

It is hardly surprising. Wills has a self-confessed weakness for a literary reference. He describes himself as a huge fan of Shakespeare and, prior to the success of *Ophelia* last year, he directed an adaptation of *Cymbeline* while studying at the University of Texas in which he chopped up the verse and inserted sections from all the other plays, "all 35," he affirms. Wow. At any rate it is clear that the influence of the Bard played a significant role in writing *The Moths*. Sometimes it's a cheekily pilfered quotation, sometimes more a general tone. The scenes with Omphale bare a wonderful likeness to those of the mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with Omphale herself at times reminiscent of Bottom as she pompously orders people around, is completely oblivious to her own incompetence. The relationship between Caeneus and Herakles is almost a backwards version of *Twelfth Night's* Orsino and Cesario where Caenus is the courtier and Herakles the impostor in drag. Yet when the young boy falls in love with the man it is the man who knows the truth about the young boy's sex.

### FREE DIRECTING

Aside from the Shakespeare-athon, then, has he ever directed a play he didn't devise himself? "No," he tells me happily, "I don't like directing other people's work."

One advantage of this is the freedom you then have to play around with the text. Both cast and director query lines they're not sure about and suggestions are always welcome. "Do we like 'halibut?'" Wills enquires of the cast, stopping them halfway through a scene to tweak one of the lines, "Shall we make it cod, or salmon?" In fact the whole rehearsal feels very laid back and bonhomie. The cast crowd round with advice as Omphale tries to position herself on Herakles as he attempts to take on the role of her chair and Wills himself is more than happy to get involved as he experiments with the most regal way to give somebody a piggy-back ride.

At this stage in the process, however, things are very flexible. The cast are still working off the script and many of the scenes remain completely unblocked. A month later and a "rehearsal boot-camp" behind them and I will be intrigued to see the result. The play covers some fairly dense ground with all its themes and ideas. Add to that a script overcrowded with writers and my concern is that the concept may end up drowning in its influences... although actually that might be apt, given the influences in question. But Wills seems confident and his positive attitude is nothing if not infectious. Is it any good? Time will tell. ■