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In bringing 'Flanders' to stage, writer, director prove their talent

By DAMIEN JAQUES
Journal Sentinel theater critic

"Midnight and Moll Flanders," the new stage adaptation of Daniel Defoe's 1722 novel that opened Friday night, confirms several suspicions.

First, it establishes Milwaukee writer Marie Kohler as a playwright to be taken seriously. She gave us hints of that with her drama "Counting Days," produced here in 1995.

"Midnight and Moll Flanders" is the work of a sure-handed and deft writer who succeeds where many better-known dramatists have stumbled — adapting a sprawling, large-canvas novel to the stage.

Second, it confirms Norma Saldivar as a director who works ex-

actly well with playwrights in developing new theater pieces. She showed signs of that with "Counting Days," which she directed, but "Moll" is a much bigger and more complex project. It places Saldivar in the big leagues of directors who can stage a new work from scratch.

Is Moll using her tragic beginnings as simply an excuse for her criminal behavior? And where does feminism end and selfishness begin?

Kohler stays true to the novel while streamlining it and giving the story her own spin, emphasizing the moral debate between stubborn sinner and stern preacher. Moll's last-second reprieve and redemption, complete with love, wealth and respectability, is a clunky plot turn the playwright handles as well as could be expected.

Perhaps Kohler's most impressive achievement is that we leave the theater believing more strongly in a person's ability to change for the better.

Saldivar's direction, with the help of Josh Schmidt's recorded music, provides us with a feel for

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the novel's epic sweep while always staying clear and focused. She moves the action around several platform playing areas on the Mainstage Theatre's thrust stage.

The entire cast is strong, but the show belongs to Laurie Birmingham and Emma Bates, playing old and young Moll, respectively. Birmingham possesses the bitter bite of a street survivor who believes she can count on only herself for support. Bates blends ingenue sweetness with a steely resolve to get what she wants.

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"Midnight and Moll Flanders" continues through Feb. 27 in the UWM Mainstage Theatre, 2400 E. Kenwood Blvd. Tickets are on sale in the UWM arts box office and by phone at (414) 229-4308.