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

By DAMIEN JAQUES
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"Midnight and Moll Flanders," the new stage adaptation of Danicl 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-

fore her hanging. An unsympathetic Puritan preacher is attempting to get Moll to repent, and she defiantly responds with a recollection of her life, which we see in flashback scenes.

The play succeeds on several levels. Moll's voice, so strong in the novel, comes through with great clarity and purpose here, as it leads us through an engaging tale of a woman who refuses to conform to 17th-century English society's standards,

Moll's story resonates with moral issues that are relevant today, and Kohler lays them out for our consideration. "Moral choices are so much easier when one is well-fed," Moll self-righteously tells the preacher.

But what if the victim of her theft has had luck as bad as hers?

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tremely 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 Saldiyar in the big leagues of directors who can stage a new work from scratch.

"Midnight and Moll Flanders" is a joint production of Renaissance Theaterworks, which provided four of its Equity (union) actors, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Professional Theatre Training Program, which contributed 15 of its acting students and set designer R.H. Graham. It is being presented at UWM's Mainstage Theatre.

Defoe's book follows the ad-

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 ventures and misadventures of Moll, a 17th-century Englishwoman born in the notorious Newgate Prison of a mother who was condemned to death. Living the rootless life of an orphan, the ambitious Moll was unwilling to blend into the servant class quietly. Smart, appealing and attractive, she attached herself to a variety of men.

But the men weren't always there to support her, so Moll turned to thievery, squelching her conscience by reasoning that she had a right to survive.

That survival is in extreme jeopardy when we first see Moll in this adaptation. She has returned to the place of her birth, where she is awaiting execution for theft and bigamy.

The play is set on the night be-

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.

Shawn Douglass' portrait of the unbending preacher is particularly right on the money.

"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.