

A Companion Guide to Play and Production

By Lucas H. Reilly



SIN STREET SOCIAL CLUB

By Jessica Austgen

Adapted from *The Rover* by Aphra Behn

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THE PLAY IN 100 WORDS

Helen, a novice nun, and Florie Mae, her nightclub-singing sister, hit the streets of 1916 New Orleans in a last-ditch effort to save their deceased daddy’s dance hall, The Basin Street Social Club, and determine their own destinies. Florie Mae is desperate to marry Belville while Helen is looking for an excuse to avoid being confirmed as a full-fledged nun. Their brother Pete, however, insists that Florie Mae marry his friend Tony Trudeau, a local alderman with dubious motives. Belville, equally determined to find Florie Mae, arrives on the scene with a couple of friends in tow - Blunt, a rustically-inclined client and Wilmore, a rakish captain. While Belville obsesses over saving his beloved, Wilmore is equally attracted to the lively Helen as well as Angie B, an aging madam whose recent return to the Crescent City has caused quite a stir on the streets of Storyville. After a night of romantic rendezvous, mistaken identities and way too many fistfights, the lovers are reunited, the club is saved, and Helen finds her own particular brand of happiness.



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DEFINITIONS

Pinkerton Detective: An American detective agency founded in the 1850s in Chicago

Where y'at?: How's it going?

Hellion: A rowdy or mischievous person. A troublemaker.

Roscoe: Gun

Cavaliere Servente: Sugar Daddy

23 Skidoo: To leave quickly, to get out while the gettin's good

Demimondaine: A woman of ill repute

Hoosegow: Prison

Chanteuse: A female nightclub singer

Cher: My dear

Tout suite: Right now

Rake: A fashionable and/or wealthy man of promiscuous habits

APHRA BEHN'S *THE ROVER* AND JESSICA AUSTGEN'S *SIN STREET SOCIAL CLUB*

When Aphra Behn's *The Rover* premiered in 1677, she was in the middle of a two-decade stretch in which she was one of the most prolific writers in the English language. One of the first English women to make her living as a writer, Behn shattered expectations. After John Dryden, she was the second most published and produced playwright of the English Restoration, producing nineteen plays – of which *The Rover* is the most notable.

The Rover, a raucous comedy about a group of Englishmen and women in Naples at Carnival time, became Behn's longest lasting and most respected play. Although *The Rover* is about the amorous and sexual exploits of a group of men at Carnival, off the stage, Behn's writing and public discourse focused on asserting that women writers had been held back not by their lack of skill, but by their exclusion from education. After living a life that included work as a political spy for Charles II, it was natural that she should be angry that male writers could live lives of debauchery and write sinful, sexy plays without rebuke while she was smeared for writing plays with the same content. She responded by publishing and producing more and more plays that brought more and more public attacks against her morality and her work, several of which played before the royal court. In fact, *The Rover* became a favorite of the King's court, and is, 350 years later, one of the most well-known and respected plays from the Restoration.

Writer Jessica Austgen transposes the action from Naples to 1916 New Orleans and from Carnival to Mardi Gras, giving new life to the story under a new name, *Sin Street Social Club*. She reimagines characters in a new setting and shifts the narrative to follow more closely the story of Helen, a woman who is being forced to enter a convent as the play begins. The Rover of *The Rover*, Wilmore, a swashbuckling rake who uses his wit and charm to outsmart foes and seduce women, is still present in *Sin Street Social Club*, but this play most closely follows Helen's transformation as she tries to avoid being confirmed as a nun and also avoid being married. In the spirit of Aphra Behn's revolutionary contribution to literature and women's liberation, Helen navigates a world that seems to insist upon ending her story in a manner unsatisfactory to her. As you watch the play and track Helen and the other characters' journeys, consider the political nature of Aphra Behn's career as a writer in a male-dominated society, and how our contemporary world might be different and/or similar to both 1600s Europe and 1910s New Orleans.



Aphra Behn



Jessica Austgen

RESTORATION CHARACTER TYPES AND TELLS

Sin Street Social Club is inherited from English Restoration comedy. After a period of puritan principles, the Restoration was a sort of counter-culture that dictated debauchery, sexual adventure, and everything anti-puritan to be in style--particularly on the stage and in the lives of those in the public eye. As writers, audiences, and public figures pushed the boundaries of improper behavior, a new style of theatre was born, predicated on character types previously appearing in literature and drama, but altogether new and expertly crafted to the aims of Restoration writers to delight, shock, and titillate audiences. This new style featured character types that appeared both in this heightened society and in the plays of the day; some of those types and their analogs in *Sin Street Social Club* are explored below:

THE RAKE

A fashionable, smooth-talking, attractive person of style and often of wealth. The Rake is adept at seduction, conversation, wit, dueling both with words and weapons, all things social and can pull off the most difficult of schemes with grace and a personal flair. There are both male and female rakes, the male rake most often using his charms and skills to seduce and conquer any woman of his choosing, and often multiple women over the course of a play. The female rake, while sometimes driven by her own sexuality, often uses her skill and status to orchestrate love/sex matches between others and trick lesser social beings into traps that improve her social standing. The true Rake in *Sin Street Social Club* is Helen; she successfully navigates the world of the play with cunning and wit, scheming to arrange Florie Mae's marriage to Belville, the rescue of the family business, and her escape from the nunnery and/or marriage. Wilmore is also a Rake, though less so in this play than in *The Rover*.

THE FOP

The Fop thinks he is a Rake, but alas, lacks grace, and style. Often unaware of their own failures, Fops think themselves the most attractive and stylish people in the room and are easy victims in the schemes of more witty and wise characters. One might argue that Tony is foppish in this play, thinking that his cleverness and status of being "above the law" will result in his victory, while not fighting his own battles nor winning them.

THE COUNTRY BUMPKIN

(or the Dolt, or the Gull, or the Humor-Butt)

Country Bumpkins are unaware of the social world of the city (usually because of their rural upbringing), and often fail to satisfy social norms and expectations. Well intentioned, driven by base desire, and either in love with or revolted by the ways of the city, the Bumpkin is often an instrument in the schemes of rakes and lovers. Blunt is the closest thing to Country Bumpkin in *Sin Street Social Club*, evidenced by his inexperience with women and innocence about the ways of the world.



RESTORATION CHARACTER TYPES AND TELLS

(CONTINUED)

THE INGENUE

The Ingenué is a lover, through and through. Not driven by sex, but by love, Ingenués travel in male-female pairs, and over the course of a Restoration play are held apart by other characters, given circumstances, or by their own volition. The Ingenués in this play are the ever-so-much-in-love Belville and Florie Mae, who are blinded by their love and spend the whole play trying to end up together.

THE WHORE

The Whore is a woman, usually an actual prostitute, that uses her profession as a means of control and power over both men and women in the social sphere. She capitalizes on the base desires of others, but often ends up outwitted by rakes and those higher on the social ladder. Angie B is the whore of this play, using her status as the most expensive prostitute in town as leverage against her adversaries.

THE HEAVY FATHER

The Heavy Father is a largely functional character that helps in plot development by opposing marriage between Ingenués and withholding money from younger characters. Sometimes this role is taken on by a brother, as in *Sin Street Social Club*, where Pete, driven by a love for his family and belief that his ideas are best, causes more problems for himself and his loved ones than anything else.



THEMATIC OVERVIEW OF *SIN STREET SOCIAL CLUB*

The plays of the Restoration were more like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* than *Downton Abbey*, often calling out, celebrating, and playfully jeering at real misbehaviors and promiscuities. The themes of the literature of the Restoration reflect a culture of vanity, sexual promiscuity, constant social maneuvering, and a focus on the pleasures of privileged life. Inherited from a piece of Restoration literature, *Sin Street Social Club* shares many of these themes.

Gender Roles:

The proper gendered behavior of men and women is in constant tension in *Sin Street Social Club*. Pete, trying to fulfill the typical male gender role of provider and protector, tries to dictate the behavior of the two women in his family, which causes his sisters a good deal of grief. Helen rejects both entering the convent and marrying a man, placing her in opposition to the typical female role in her society. Florie Mae and Belville are honorable in the eyes of gendered society, following their hearts in heterosexual love. The other characters in the play exist along a huge spectrum of gendered behaviors from Angie B, the queen prostitute, to bumbling and easily-taken-advantage-of Blunt. By presenting us with such a large spectrum of gendered behaviors, and placing Helen as our main protagonist, Austgen calls into question the heteronormative, patriarchal, focused-on-male-pleasure world in which our characters exist. As the play unfolds, consider the gender roles and gendered behavior presented in the play. How does gender affect each character? Do dictated gender roles defeat or help any individual character?

Wit/Social Maneuvering:

In this play many schemes and plans are formed to further the aims of those hatching the plan. The wit and social grace of each character dictates the success of his or her adventures. For example, Helen is successful in disguise, and therefore is able to turn Angie B against Wilmore and pull Wilmore down a few pegs. As the play unfolds, which characters exercise the best wit/social skill? Which characters are the most vulnerable to witty characters?

Love/Lust:

The play begins with the revelation that Florie Mae and Belville are in love, but Florie Mae must be married to Tony. Eventually, love triumphs and Tony is defeated but not before a long and passionate string of lustful encounters between other characters. As the play unfolds, notice each sexual/romantic entanglement and the influence of love and lust present. Is there any love between Wilmore and Angie B? Is there any lust you can observe between Florie Mae and Belville? How does lust and/or love defeat or help in the success of the characters?

Debauchery/Sexual Liberty:

Many characters throughout the play engage in debauchery, drunkenness, and are quite open with their sexuality, some using it as their business. There's a spectrum of uncouth behavior in the play, with each character living somewhere along it. As the play unfolds, consider how each character's positioning on that spectrum informs his or her relationships with the other characters and how that drives the action of the play.

STAGE MANAGING A WORLD PREMIERE

An Interview With Christine Moore

In between managing two productions (*The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Sin Street Social Club*), including dozens of actors, designers, and technicians, as well as hundreds of props and cues, Stage Manager Christine Moore made enough time to answer some questions about what it's like to stage manage a world premiere like *Sin Street*. Our correspondence is below.

How do you define your role as Stage Manager? What is your favorite part of the job?

I define stage management as being the master liaison between the artistic team and the technical team. I have to speak both languages and try to keep everyone communicating effectively. I keep the tech folks abreast of what we are discovering in rehearsal and the cast and director up-to-date on limitations and logistics from the tech side. My favorite part of the job is when I'm able to anticipate needs and requests before they are brought up or become an issue. A comfortable rehearsal room helps create the best creative product.

What differences are there to stage managing a new play compared to a play that has already been produced?

The biggest differences involve the keeping of the script. Changes are constantly being made to our text, and everyone needs to literally be on the same page! This requires working closely with the playwright to determine the best way to distribute new page cuts/adds to the cast, director, understudies, and designers. As one change can have a domino effect (i.e., this added comedic line now necessitates a comedic prop which now requires a pocket in a costume), it's my job to help keep things manageable and minimize unnecessary work for others.

What is most exciting about stage managing a new play?

This is the first time these words have been spoken in front of people. This is the first interpretation of this technical moment. I get to call these cues! It is also fun to watch jokes and moments grow and change organically in rehearsal; it's like a live YouTube compilation of bloopers and gag reels. I am in awe of Jessica Austgen, the playwright for *Sin Street*, for her flexibility and commitment to taking the best idea in the room while maintaining the artistic integrity of her play.

Is there any added pressure knowing that the playwright will see the show you're managing?

Thankfully, since our playwright is in the room with us for almost every rehearsal, we have time to "get it right" under her guidance. However, my opening night tummy-butterflies will be a little bit worse because I especially want it to go well so the play we have fallen in love with goes on to be produced over and over again - more so than the pressure I feel for my director and cast on a regular show's opening. I'll be pounding the Ginger Tea that day.

Do you think it is important to produce new work? Why/why not?

Producing new works is incredibly important. New work means new points of view, and more points-of-view offer more insight into our past and ongoing history as perceived and filtered through new lenses. This can draw in and broaden our pool of theatre-goers and the kinds of people affected by our art. Particularly, commissioning, supporting, and producing new works involving authors, designers, directors, and casts of people of color and women are tremendously important to me as an artist.

DIRECTING A WORLD PREMIERE

An Interview With Lynne Collins

Artistic Director of Plays and Director of *Sin Street Social Club* Lynne Collins agreed to sit down to answer some queries about new works, adaptations, and this process in particular.

Why or how did this particular process begin?

I had a notion that within my first five years here I wanted to develop a new play, and reimagining classics is something I'm passionate about, so I was interested in an adaptation. I'd worked with Jessica as an actor and she'd done some writing for our production of *Tartuffe* that revealed a great voice and comic timing. Then she wrote a play for the Denver Center for the Performing Arts called *Drag On*, which I thought was really funny and smart. So, I approached her about a commission and we eventually agreed on an adaptation of *The Rover*. She had a really solid draft in six months, and we were able to workshop it a few times last season with the company, and here we are.

This play is more Helen's play than Wilmore's play. What other big differences are there between Sin Street and The Rover?

The setting. We've moved from Carnival in Naples to New Orleans and moved forward to 1916. Jess played around with ideas for where to set the play, and I loved the idea of bringing it forward but not bringing it all the way to now. I thought that was a clever way to deal with some of the issues of the play in terms of women's lack of agency, and it's also just a really fun place and time. The point of view has shifted to ask how these women are going to find their voices and their power rather than *The Rover's* focus on men and their victories.

What challenges have there been or are there to directing a new play? What advantages are there?

There are many advantages. When an actor says "I don't know why I'm saying this," which happens at some point in every rehearsal process, we have Jess right there to say, "You mean this," or "I don't know, I need to clarify that."

The challenge is that we have no blueprint. And we're all discovering the play as we go through it, so we have to work more slowly, trying to make sure that Jess's story is clear and that we are sticking to the spirit of what she's created. I feel a very big obligation for Jess to see the best possible production of her new play. We all feel an extra excitement because we're the first people saying the words.

That leads right into my next question... Is there more pressure directing a play when you know the playwright is going to see the show?

Yes, I think when you say "I'm going to partner with you to be the first production of this thing you've created," you have a very big obligation to both bring it healthy into the world and to listen to the writer's intention. That should always be at the front of our minds as directors. But when the writer is sitting there, it's easy to keep in mind.

PROMPTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What is the inciting incident/choice in the main conflict of the play? How does that incident fuel the action of the play?
2. Which character in the play resonates with you most? Why do you associate with that character?
3. After answering #2, refer to the Restoration Character Types and Tells section, and see which type the character with whom you most closely associate is. Do you feel like this type in your life?
4. Have you ever celebrated Mardi Gras? How does setting the play during this raucous celebration help to drive the action and inform the play/characters?
5. Which parts of the play do you find the funniest? With a friend/classmate, share the moments you find funniest and discuss what contributes to the comedy of each moment.
6. The English Restoration is about 350 years in the past. What aspects of Restoration literature still resonate with our culture today? Which are products of the time alone and don't translate to contemporary culture?
7. Many plans are hatched throughout the play. Which plan do you find to be the most cunning and why?
8. This is the very first production of this play. What is most interesting/exciting to you about seeing a world premiere?
9. This is an adaptation of a play from about 350 years ago. What other dated stories would you be interested in seeing reimagined?
10. If you could time travel, which play would you want to be present for the very first performance of? Why?

FURTHER READING

Biography of Aphra Behn:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/aphra-behn>

The "Character" in Restoration Comedy by Edward Chauncey Baldwin:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/457004.pdf>

The Rover by Aphra Behn

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21339/21339-h/files/rover.html>

Types of Male Characters in Restoration Comedies, from Hume, Robert D.

The Development of English Drama in the Late 17th Century:

http://english.fju.edu.tw/lctd/asp/periods/4/british/concept_4_1_4.htm

Types of Female Characters in Restoration Comedies, from Hume, Robert D.

The Development of English Drama in the Late 17th Century:

http://english.fju.edu.tw/lctd/asp/periods/4/british/concept_4_1_5.htm

17th Century Notable Women, including some info on Aphra Behn:

<https://people.ucalgary.ca/~mamaes/17a.html>