

Five Clever Courtesans



There are very few occasions in which explicit representations of lesbian sexuality are a genuine aid to narrative integrity. More often than not, they are used to cynically sex up otherwise drab work and fool audiences into thinking that they're seeing something racy and brave, as with *Five Clever Courtesans*.

Five notorious mistresses are brought back from the dead for an evening of conversation. Among those gathered for our education and supposed titillation are a concubine from the

Chinese emperor's court and Nell Gwyn, the famous actress and royal mistress. The women take turns telling their stories, bragging about their conquests and emphasising the power and influence afforded to courtesans throughout history.

But when it comes to the ugly side of these women's professions, the silence is deafening. The rapes, beatings and ritual humiliations they would have undergone are passed over, a few weak jokes about funny-coloured spunk the only concessions to the true horrors of a life of prostitution.

There are a few absorbing historical details touched upon, but for much of the play it is

difficult to see beyond the horribly exaggerated performances to the material beyond. Georgina Panton, as Nell Gwyn, is the only watchable member of this unfortunate band, as well as the only one whose on stage "sexiness" has any hint of sincerity to it.

Amateurish acting, poor pacing and undercooked humour are unpleasant to witness, but ultimately, forgivable. Trying to pass off an hour and a half of lewd chitchat and soft porn as a celebration of female sexuality and power is not. [Jo Caird]

**C aquila, 8:50pm - 10:20pm,
5-30 Aug, not 17, £8.50**