

Arts & Culture

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THEATER

'Dangerous Liaisons' Spells Lies, Seduction and Revenge

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

Every generation thinks it's the one to discover sex, and each generation has those who think the world is going to the dogs. With "Dangerous Liaisons," Silver Spring Stage transports us back to the late 18th century, where a certain class of French society could give today's rather brazen society a good run for its money.

Christopher Hampton's adaptation of Pierre de Laclos' novel keeps much of the original flavor and adds a few modern twists. The plot kicks off with the aristocratic Marquise de Merteuil plotting to avenge a slight, enlisting the libertine Vicomte de Valmont to assist in her revenge. Valmont has his own conquest in mind.

Thus begins a series of lies and seductions that take many twists and turns, where everyone is a pawn and the worst thing that can happen is if you actually fall in love. "Win, or die," Merteuil says at a particularly honest moment, but this is a play with few honest moments.

The trick to this play is to keep all the action and motivations clear. If that fails, the play becomes impossible to follow. Fortunately, director Scott Bloom and his cast manages this tricky task using humor to keep these somewhat unsavory characters



PHOTOS BY NEIL EDGELL

Robin Covington (Emilie) & Andrew C. Schneider (Valmont)

intriguing.

The one liners are worthy of Oscar Wilde at times. "Love is something you use," Merteuil explains at one point, "it's not something you fall into – like quicksand." A witty comeback, but also quite revealing.

As Merteuil and Valmont, actors Roxanne Fournier Stone and Andrew Schneider are well matched. Schneider has the easy going charm one would expect of an 18th century rake, while Stone is more calculating and heartless. It's a sword of fire versus an ice cold dagger, and both characters can wield their weapons with skill, against others but also against themselves.

While these two characters dominate the action, the supporting cast is also well chosen. Kevin O'Reilly and Lenora Spahn make a wonderfully naïve couple, Kate Luscas a vulnerable Tourvel, and Richard Kalnins a very dutiful personal servant. This is one of the few productions that does a good job with the character of Valmont's aunt Rosamunde – usually lost in the hubbub, here Carole Cox makes her a sane voice of reason, and one of the few in the entire play.

My only criticism is with some of the scene changes – this is a play in two acts but with many small scenes per act. Some scene changes are quick and fluid while others are too



Andrew C. Schneider (Valmont), Kate Lucas (Tourvel), Lenora Spahn (Cécile), Susan Cote (Volanges) and Carole Cox (Rosemonde)

long and more jerky. I think part of the problem is the period harpsichord music, a rather sudden and harsh sound used at times when a scene should quietly fade out or flow into another. The Mozart selections worked better than these Bach/Baroque pieces.

Otherwise, Richard Battistelli's costumes, Jim Robertson's lighting and John Decker's simple and open set design all set the proper period flavor.

Obviously there is more going on here than a complicated sex romp, amusing that would be by itself. After all, none of these people seem to need a job so what do they do with their lives? Hampton is faithful to the novel but added a modern touch.

The novel was published in 1782, but these characters keep talking about the future. We know something they do not – how the 1790's would prove a very difficult decade for the French upper class. Something about a revolution, and while Laclos did not know about it, and Hampton never mentions it, the reasons for those world shaking events are right here. .

"Dangerous Liaisons" continues at Silver Spring Stage through June 11. For reservations, call (301) 593-6036.

"Dangerous Liaisons"
Silver Spring Stage
★★★

Air of Change for the Powerfully Sweet 'Caroline, or Change'

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

Playwright Tony Kushner certainly has an eerie second sight. His "Homebody/Kabul" was about the Taliban in Afghanistan before the events of 9/11 made them household words. Equally eerie is his book for the musical "Caroline, or Change," currently getting a rousing production down at Studio Theater. "There is no under-ground is Louisiana," the lead character sings as a refrain, "only under water." This was written before Hurricane Katrina made the literary symbolism all too true.

But that's not the point of this marvelous musical. Kushner grew up in Louisiana and he was devoted to the family's African American house-



Julia Nixon and Max Talisman star in "Caroline or Change."

PHOTOS BY SCOTT SUCHMAN

keeper, so this musical has some autobiography to it. It deals with Caroline, the housekeeper struggling to keep her family afloat, and Noah, the young Jewish child who dotes on Caroline. There is quite a bit of backstory here – Noah is grieving for his recently deceased mother and Caroline laments that she's almost 40, unmarried, and still a maid.

The key word in that title is "change." Noah's new mother makes a deal with Caroline that any spare change she finds in Noah's clothes during laundry, she can keep. That causes a chain of events between Noah and the housekeeper, and within Caroline's own family. But this is the sixties so other change is in the air – including the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement.

Kushner packs a lot into his two hour musical, veering from gritty re-

alism to full-flung fantasy. In the opening number, Carolina vents her sorrow accompanied by singers playing the Washer and Dryer and later the Moon (you try writing lyrics to household appliances). Act I is fairly static but it does include a powerful scene when the news breaks of the Kennedy assassination.

The music is by Jeanine Tesori, who worked on "Thoroughly Modern Millie." "Caroline" shows a love of pastiche that it shares with "Millie," but there the similarities end. "Caroline" is a thorough composed work, almost a pop opera. While the show does not break down into individual songs, there are some great moments – the three singers playing the radio are right out of the Supremes while some of Caroline's solo moments have a

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