

# Arts & Culture

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## THEATER

### Bringing a modern touch to an old *Stratagem*

By David Cannon  
Sentinel Arts Critic

About 10 years ago I saw a production of *The Beaux' Stratagem* at the University of Maryland. It was a very good student production of a classic Restoration Comedy, but the comedy had dated and it was only intermittently funny.

But it is a classic story, so at the Shakespeare Theater is a very lively production of a totally revamped look at this play.

The history of the script is as fascinating as the play itself. Eighteenth century playwright George Farquhar wrote the original play – a box office hit of its day. Then early last century Thornton Wilder (of *Our Town* fame) began a modern adaptation but left it incomplete at his death. Finally local writer Ken Ludwig (*Lend Me a Tenor*) has completed the adaptation now on stage at the Shakespeare.

What is amazing is that the three writers somehow manage not to get in each other's way. For the average viewer, one would be hard pressed to say this is the original Farquhar and this is Ludwig. This is a Restoration Comedy with Farquhar's original plot mainly intact, but

with a more modern attitude.

The plot is easy to follow but impossible to summarize. The main plot involves two young men, Archer and Aimwell, who have dissipated their fortunes and are looking for rich women to marry. Along the way they encounter highwaymen, wily innkeepers, a man of the cloth with a thriving business on the side, and a doctor who gloats at her medical equipment, which looks like it's right out of the Spanish Inquisition. Oh yes, they encounter plenty of single and not so single women.

Farquhar's play is historically important because it is starting down the road toward modern farce. Wilder and Ludwig just gave it a big nudge: streamlining the plot, beefing up the comic aspect of the characters, and removing dated references. In what I am sure is a Ken Ludwig touch, even the final sword fight takes on a comical aspect, with a definite modern twist at the end.

Director Michael Kahn realizes this is a farce and treats it as a romp – quick paced and full of double takes and visual jokes. His actors are all good, starting with Christian Conn and Christopher Innvar as likeable rogues Aimwell and Archer. Equally good are the three actresses serving as their romantic interests: Coleen Delany as a lively innkeeper's daughter, Julia Coffey as the naïve Dorinda and Veanne Cox deliciously dry as the unhappily married Sullen.

As in most farces, it is the secondary characters that often have the best time. Floyd King steals the final scenes as a much put upon

French parson, while Rick Foucheux is a lot of fun in a very modern role of shady minister Gloss. But Nancy Robinette tops them all as Lady Bountiful. Overly indulgent of her drunkard son and overly proud of her meager medical skills, this is a role tailor made for getting laughs and Robinette plays it to the hilt.

The technical aspects of the show are good, but it is James Kronzer's set that is most amazing. It is a jigsaw puzzle mounted on several turnstiles, so when a scene changes, the rural inn suddenly comes apart and moves into place as Lady Bountiful's elegant home. The only sour note is that there is not enough room in the final scene for that courtly dance, which turns out to be a very cramped affair.

Otherwise this is a classic romp, finally brought to life for modern audiences. The fact that the myriad of writers left so few telltale fingerprints is amazing. But that's for the specialists – this is a very funny script and a lively production and few people need to know more than that.



PHOTO BY CAROL ROSEGG

Christopher Innvar as Jack Archer, Ian Bedford as Sullen and Veanne Cox as Mrs. Kate Sullen in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's production of George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem*, adapted by Thornton Wilder and Ken Ludwig and directed by Michael Kahn.

*The Beaux' Stratagem* continues at the Shakespeare Theater through Dec. 31. For more information, call (202) 547-1122.

**The Beaux' Stratagem**  
Shakespeare Theatre  
★★★★

### No waiting needed at this *Bus Stop*

By David Cannon  
Sentinel Arts Critic

William Inge – now there's a name you don't hear every day. Yet there was a time when this playwright had a string of box office hits: *Picnic*, *Come Back Little Sheba* and *Darkness at the Top of the Stairs*.

These plays are little revived these days, but Silver Spring Stage is currently giving a strong revival of Inge's most popular play, thanks to the Marilyn Monroe movie adaptation.

*Bus Stop* is Inge at his most humorous, while at the same time presenting a true slice of Americana. It is a classic setup – a snowstorm in Kansas throws a ragtag group of people together in a small town diner. There are several stories going on

among the bus passengers, and then new subplots develop as the passengers interact with the town people. A lot of this is comical, especially the overly naïve behavior of the younger members of this group, but there are more mature undertones as well.

The main plot is a naïve young cowboy named Bo, who has fallen head over heels for "nightclub" singer Cherie. Bo wants to marry Cherie and take her to his ranch in Montana, while Cherie has different ideas. Both characters have a lot to learn during this weather-enforced stopover.

These roles can come so close to cliché and the best thing director Norman Seltzer and his cast do is avoid those stereotypes. Matt Boliek is a rowdy young Bo but he shows us the cowboy's vulnerability to make the character likeable even when he

is at his most infuriating. Lynd Poore wisely makes Cheri her own character and avoids the temptation to slavishly copy Monroe.

It is well worth seeing the original play, which is both wiser and more mature than the movie.

But the whole cast is good. Roman Gusso does well as Bo's quiet but wise friend Virgil, and he does a great job in his understated final

scene. Meanwhile Lenora Spahn and Toni Carmine do well as the bus stop workers who become increasingly involved in these characters' lives. Josh Canary makes for a humorous bus driver while Scott Holden does a good job as Dr. Lyman. Lyman is a humorous character with a secret, and a rare instance of a character that may be more disturbing now than when the play was first written.

Andy Greenleaf's set design looks like a well worn small town diner and Greenleaf also portrays the town's amiable sheriff.

The sheriff and Dr. Lyman is a reminder that if you only know the Marilyn Monroe movie, the play is going to be a surprise. Dr. Lyman is gone from the movie (1950s sensibilities no doubt played a part) and I believe the Sheriff is missing too. That reduces the role of the bus stop

workers a great deal. The movie does add a lot of up front material like the rodeo and bus ride, which helps opens the movie up from the play's one set environment. The movie is enjoyable in its own right, while clearly playing up its biggest asset, which is easily Monroe.

Still it is well worth seeing the original play, which is both wiser and more mature than the movie and at times more humorous too.

*Bus Stop* continues at Silver Spring Stage through Dec. 3. For reservations, call (301) 593-6036.

**Bus Stop**  
Silver Spring Stage  
★★★★

Arts & Culture reviews  
continue on page L-22