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Actor's Express mounts a stylish 'Les Liaisons'

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Posted: 12:00 a.m. Wednesday, Sept. 10, 2014

By Bert Osborne - For the AJC

In the tour-de-force performance by Park Krausen as a sexually unscrupulous 18th-century French aristocrat, the Actor's Express production of "Les Liaisons Dangereuses" finds its perfect La Marquise de Merteuil.

Christopher Hampton's supremely sophisticated and wickedly witty play (based on a 1782 novel by Choderlos de Laclos) pits this alluring "virtuoso of deceit" against an equally amorous and amoral accomplice, her former (and possibly future) lover, Le Vicomte de Valmont, in a cruel game of carnal conquest that eventually becomes a bona fide battle of the sexes.



The Actor's Express production of "Les Liaisons Dangereuses" co-stars Park Krausen and Paul Hester. PHOTO CREDIT: BreeAnne Clowdus.

Given Krausen's impressive classical background as a longtime ensemble member with Georgia Shakespeare, it's of little wonder - and yet entirely wondrous - how formidably the actress commands the Express stage and masters the loquacious language of the play, intricately dissecting all the vicious layers of the character and making her most callous or scandalous comments sound deceptively soothing or seductive.

Directed with an elegant style by Melissa Foulger, the show co-stars Paul Hester as Valmont. His own classical training has been at the Shakespeare Tavern, where he's consistently one of its brightest acting

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talents, and the prospect of watching him exchanging “philosophical speculations” or otherwise trading insults and fireworks with Krausen is initially exciting.

Unfortunately, the end results are anticlimactic, because Hester rarely holds his ground quite as firmly or as fully as Krausen. While there's absolutely no question about how men could fall victim to the tantalizing schemes of her Merteuil, it's somewhat less palpable that Hester's Valmont might leave various young ladies swooning.

Sure, he's handsome, but there's a slightly monotonous quality to a lot of his dialogue and a certain rigidity in his posture and demeanor. That works in conveying the snide sarcasm of the role, if not in providing much of a sense of Valmont's dashing charisma and passion, or the mischievous glee he takes in playing his libidinous “game.”

Before all is said and done (in roughly three hours), the show starts to feel overlong - especially whenever Krausen's off stage. For the most part, though, Foulger manages to keep up the pace; even the numerous scene changes are cleverly conceived, with servants rearranging a “purgatorial” sofa to indicate different boudoirs.

The supporting cast includes Jennifer Schottstaedt and Kristin Butler as the gullible objects of Valmont's duplicitous desire, and Barrett Doyle as a glorified boy toy for Merteuil. The lovely period costumes are designed by Erik Teague.

The double entendres come fast and furious - about “mounting excitement,” “piercing her defenses,” “stiffening his resolve,” etc. - with plenty of insinuating smiles and furtive glances to match. Alas, you're likely to miss as many of those as you catch. Depending on where you happen to be seated in the audience, pivotal moments may unfold with a character's back to you or with one actor blocking your view of another.

Then again, as it is the tale of two scoundrels with so many ulterior motives and hidden agendas, perhaps that's fittingly calculated.

THEATER REVIEW

“Les Liaisons Dangereuses”

Grade: B

Through Oct. 5. 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays. \$21-\$32. Actor's Express (at King Plow Arts Center), 887 W. Marietta St., Atlanta. 404-607-7469. www.actors-express.com.

Bottom line: See it mainly for Park Krausen's bravura performance.

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