

Review: Oh, life's a show at Gulfshore's 'Liar'

Chris Silk

3:33 PM, Apr 8, 2015

NAPLES, Fla. - Life's a show. And you won't get a better one than at "The Liar."

Gulfshore Playhouse closes their season in altogether divine fashion (and lords above, do we mean FASHION) with Pierre Corneille's seventeenth century farce (adapted by David Ives) about Doronte, the playboy who cannot speak the truth, and his quest for love on the streets of the City of Light.

Director Cody Nickell starts with a concept: Cavalier meets glam rock. Onto that, he welds sharp acting, smart comedic sensibilities and costume designer Tony Johnson's fanciful creations that seem exactly what Bowie's Ziggy Stardust would have worn if "Starman" dropped in 1660.

Let's dispense with the finery, for you'll notice it first (and be talking of it long after!). John Keabler (Doronte) stalks the stage in knee-high black leather boots, orange tights and a yellow mesh top; he blows kisses to the ladies in the front row from a blue brocade jacket with puffed sleeves of zippers, so book your seats now!

Alexis Hyatt's belle of the ball Clarice spins and twists (words and boys) around her little finger, plotting as she does in a hoop skirt and leather cuffs. Johnson makes Kate Villanova's Lucrece a lily of the valley, hiding shiny, slithery purple pants under a white peekaboo skirt. Watch her character's sly eyes and bouffant ruffled sleeves at every turn; trouble brews when Lucrece plots.

And then there's Philiste. Seth Andrew Bridges nearly steals the show. It's not the wild mane of hair, the hipster goatee and shiny sequined shoulders or even the blue star painted rakishly over one eye. It's the caddish mannerisms, lashing tongue and polishing his crystal-knobbed walking stick before kicking, spinning and whirling into an about-face and off the stage.

Nickell infuses the show with fun – and his actors toss that silliness out into the crowd. Keabler and Maboud Ebrahimzadeh's ecstatic leather-clad Alcipe (he's the hard-rocking hair-metal bad-boy who crashed this party) go through a comical hand-slapping greeting ritual every time they meet. Kate Seipert's mischievous twin maids alternate between scowls and lascivious grins while playing with the ribbons at her bosoms.

Inside David L. Arsenault's grand theater set (oh, yes! the characters know it's a show – a great big one), rotating panels in grandest pink or zestiest lemon yellow turn, turn, turn to represent fanciful sitting rooms or leafy piazzas. Who needs La tour Eiffel (it wouldn't be built till 1889 anyway) when this Paris looks so deliciously scrumptious?

Such is the power of theater – the grandest lie of all.

So, what's to look for in "The Liar?" Life lessons are few, because truth is (and always will be!) a virtue. And, as poor Cliton (a perfectly sad-sack Scott Aiello) learns, it can be exciting (if a bit messy) living by the seat of your pants.

"A liar is always lavish of oaths." Email me, chris.silk@naplesnews.com.

"The Liar" runs through April 26 at Gulfshore Playhouse at the Norris Center, 755 8th Ave. S. in downtown Naples. For tickets, call 866-811-4111 or visit gulfshoreplayhouse.org.

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Curtain Up: A win and a miss: 'The Liar' worth your time, but not so with 'Love, Loss and What I Wore

Bill O'Neill

3:12 PM, Apr 8, 2015

What a pleasant experience awaits you at Gulfshore Playhouse, where they are presenting "The Liar," a modern adaptation by David Ives ("Venus in Fur") of a play by Pierre Corneille. I must admit to some trepidation going into this. A 17th century French farce, in verse no less. Shades of Moliere – I know, I know, I'm supposed to like Moliere, but...

"The Liar," though, is a hoot. There are none of the lace handkerchiefs and tut-tuts that I expected. The plot, certainly, is contrived, but no more so than the average Ken Ludwig comedy. The verse does not interfere with the progress of the plot, it enhances it. In fact, the verse itself becomes a joke, commented on by the players themselves. The rhymes are witty and unexpected. Who would have thought "spectrum" and "rectum"? "Bi-valve" and "my valve"? Hmmm...maybe you have to be there, but in context they are hysterical.

The play concerns a young man, Dorante (John Keabler), newly arrived in Paris, and the many scrapes, romantic and otherwise, that he gets in and out of by means of his own fabrications. Dorante is not just a liar, he is the prince of liars, inventing elaborate stories full of rich detail and told with such gusto that the other characters succumb despite themselves. There is a valet (a droll Scott Aiello). There are friends (Maboud Ebraminzaden and Seth Andrew Bridges), a father (Dan Kramer), ladies to be wooed (Alexis Hyatt and Kate Villanova) twin maids (Kate Siepert) and a crowd of lovers, wives, children, fathers-in-law and others who exist only in Dorante's imagination).

Keabler, with wild punk hair and comic dash, is a charmer, and has all the elan and just enough goofiness to be endearing despite his constant deceits. Aiello, as a man cursed by his inability to tell anything but the truth, is a down-to-earth foil, a relatable clown.

The costumes are stylized and outlandish and funny. The sets are simple and witty. Everything works.

Meanwhile, over at the Tobye, The Naples Players present "Love, Loss and What I Wore." This is an ensemble show with an all-female cast. They play snippets of scenes and various set pieces. There is only one character who is consistent throughout, Gingy (Kate O'Connor). Gingy tells the story of her. The other cast members play multiple roles, and sometimes function as a kind of chorus.

The central premise is that all the experiences in the lives of these women are told in relation to the clothes they (and sometimes important other people in their lives) wore and their relationship to the clothes. The play is by the very funny Nora Ephron and Delia Ephron, and there is some clever stuff. A riff on purses, for example, is very funny and well performed.

The performers are all good, and the set, resembling an oversized closet or an old-fashioned shop, is handsome.

The premise, however, is thin. It is simply not that interesting, and it makes the women seem self-absorbed and shallow. It trivializes life's ups and downs to have all events – family relationships, marriages, love affairs, even illnesses – so strongly associated with apparel, styles and brand names. For this viewer it all failed to connect.

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GULFSHORE PLAYHOUSE HAS A HIT

THEATER NOTES

by Sidney B. Simon

4-8-15

Take one of the wittiest, down right hilarious plays of The Season, mix it with a dazzling ensemble of eight Equity players, with brilliant directing by Cody Nickell, production values of the highest quality, and you get a genuine thrilling hit. Kudos to everyone at Gulfshore Playhouse. It's well worth the drive down to Naples.

The play is "The Liar," by the award winner, David Ives, and adapted from the comedy by Pierre Corneille. Oh, and comedy it is. How the heck Ives ever pulled it off, and in verse, too boot, has to be a sign of genius.

The plot is simple, but in no way predictable. It's hard enough to know what's a lie and what's real. Dorante, (John Keabler) the lead, is an addicted "Liar." His hired man, Cliton, (Scott Aiello) suffers from being unable to "Lie." They come to Paris in 1643 to find Dorante a bride. Two beautiful women, entirely different, one as brash as the thorns on a rose, Clarice (Alexis Hyatt), and the other shy as a fluttering dove, Lucrece (Kate Villanova), quickly emerge as candidates, but with wild complications. And so we get swept up in the courtship dance laughing all the way through the marvelous Pentameters.

There's no way, watching the "Liar" at work, that we aren't, tenderly or ruthlessly, confronted by the lies we, each, have told, lies that had ramifications on other people caught in the web of our lies. But, what fun it is. The triumphs flop, the flops of near- triumphs take you rhyming through Act I as you meet all the characters, including Dorante's darling Father (Dan Kremer) who only wants to be a Grand Father before he dies.

You almost have to go just to see what really professional actors can do with a really fine script. How was Dorante able to memorize all those lines. I think the rhymes may have helped, but it was truly an awesome performance. Congratulations John Keabler. Do, come back often to The Gulfshore Playhouse. And the rest of you as well. There's not a lemon in the whole grove. I promise an un-sour evening for everyone in the audience. The loud standing ovation didn't lie.

I anticipate full houses for "The Liar." They deserve full houses for the gift they have brought to us. So, get your tickets fast. The play runs only until April 26th. Call the box office at: (866) 811-4111 or visit www.gulfshoreplayhouse.org

If you went to the play and didn't like it, feel free to email me and tell me why. And if you cherished it like I did, I'd love that email, too. compdr1@juno.com

It's true: 'The Liar' is big-time fun

ARTS COMMENTARY

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God's honest truth, "The Liar" is one of the best productions you'll see all season.

A lighthearted frolic, it's fun, entertaining and silly, yet devilishly clever, too.

Playwright David Ives, known for his wit, adapted and updated this 1644 French farce by Pierre Corneille. This means, although written in rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter, "The Liar" sports a very modern sensibility, including references to cell phones and texting. It's a marvelous marriage of old and new, linguistically and visually.

Narcissistic Dorante (John Keabler) has just arrived in Paris. Though his father mistakenly claims, "he's youthful/ but he's truthful," it seems impossible for Dorante to tell the truth. He weaves fantastic stories of wars fought; wooing a woman with a flotilla of boats, a feast and fireworks; having lunch with the queen. His philosophy seems to be: Why tell the truth when it's so much more fun to spin a tall tale?

When Dorante runs into Cliton (Scott Aiello), he hires him on the spot as his servant and valet. The somewhat gullible Cliton immediately confesses that he possesses a "tragic flaw: I cannot tell a lie."

(Ironically, Cliton's honesty gets him into trouble, while Dorante's lies save him time and time again.)

So the hero (or villain – take your pick), who cannot tell the truth, and his servant, who cannot tell a lie, make their way through the city.

They meet Clarice (Alexis Hyatt) and Lucrece (Kate Villanova), best friends. Dorante falls in love with Clarice, thinking her name is Lucrece. Clarice is secretly engaged to Alcippe (Maboud Ebrahimzadeh). Meanwhile, Dorante's father, Geronte (Dan Kremer), wants to marry him off to a Clarice, but Dorante thinks Lucrece is Clarice and vice versa. So he makes up a story about already having married someone else in another city.

Confused yet?

To make matters worse, the two friends with the similar-sounding names each have a maid – identical twin sisters Isabelle and Sabine (both skillfully and delightfully played by Kate Siepert). They, of course, also are mistaken for each other. But their personalities couldn't be more opposite: Saucy Isabelle flirts with Cliton, while severely dour Sabine upbraids him and slaps his face.

Add a friend of Alcippe's – Philiste (Seth Andrew Bridges), a foppish dandy with a secret longing for Sabine and her dominatrix manner – and you have the makings of a 17th century soap opera.

Dorante schools his honest servant in the ways of lying, telling him that “memory is the keystone of a liar,” yet he himself has a poor memory and has trouble keeping all his lies straight.

To reflect the blend of old and new dialogue, director Cody Nickell has dressed his cast in a late '70s glam rock style. Costume designer Tony Johnson's creations are an orgy of fabrics: lace, velvet, black leather and brocade with buckles, sequins, bows and straps.

Dorante has a Rod Stewart-esque haircut and a yellow lace muscle shirt. Alcippe looks like Freddy Mercury with heavy-metal black curls that reach his shoulders. He strides about in thighhigh patent-leather platform boots with 6-inch heels and so many buckles it seems as if putting them on would take all day.

(In fact, there are so many pairs of sexy black leather boots in this play that it must be a sly nod to the playwright's S/M-themed Tony-nominated play “Venus in Fur,” which played at Gulfshore Playhouse early last season.)

The set by David Arsenault, with lighting by David Upton and Eric Furbish, is a red-curtained stage, bookended by two doors and candle sconces lining the walls. Once the curtains open, the minimal scenery of trees and houses is obviously fake, and the props – benches, a garden gate – are pushed on- and off-stage by the actors, who often make eye contact with the audience while doing so. Mr. Nickell has even managed to make this part of theater housekeeping amusing and entertaining. This is a play; we know it's a play and you know it's a play, they seem to be saying.

If you look closely, even the houses in the background echo the costumes, with lines of buckle-like marks, zig-zags reminiscent of the lace ties of a corset and the cross-hatched lines of fishnet stockings.

This is one of those magical plays where everyone involved, onstage and offstage, is superlative and everything they do comes together perfectly. Kudos to Mr. Nickell, who gets the right tone of craziness and off-kilter humor from his very talented cast.

Ms. Hyatt brings a burst of flirtatious girlish energy to her role, while Mr. Aiello is the perfect foil for the swashbuckling Mr. Keabler. (I especially loved his physical humor when he's learning how to lie.) Ms. Siepert, as the twin maids, creates two very different and distinct personalities, providing some of the evening's biggest laughs.

Though we're warned in the beginning of the play not to take it seriously, that it's just a frivolity, a light delight, I can't help but see parallels in it to the art of theater: the ability to spin a fantastic tale and have people believe you, the skill of improvisation, the gift of making up imaginary people, places, events.

There is no more involuntary honest response than genuine laughter, and it came in never-ending waves on opening night.

It might be a sin to tell a lie, but what great fun to hear multitudes of them all night long from this team of masters.

No lie: Gulfshore Playhouse's 'The Liar' is hilarious

CHARLES RUNNELLS, CRUNNELLS@NEWS-PRESS.COM

11:34 a.m. EDT April 16, 2015

Gulfshore Playhouse's newest comedy is probably the most fun you'll have while still wearing pants – whether those pants are on fire or not.

"The Liar" is a giddy rush of clever rhyming wordplay, silly comedy, sexy glam-rock costumes, '70s-style rock songs and a hilariously convoluted plot with a hilariously ridiculous finale.

And I cannot tell a lie: I had a big smile plastered on my face the whole time.

How can you not smile at playful rhymes like "Louv-rah" and "move-rah" or "derrings-do" and "magic herrings, too?" And how can you not laugh at goofy physical humor such as a duel that uses index fingers instead of swords – in slow-motion, no less?

Don't let the words "iambic pentameter" scare you off. This talented cast makes those rhymed couplets sparkle, shine and sound absolutely effortless. And they do it with plenty of mischief, energy and obvious glee.

They're having a blast, and so will you.

Directed by Cody Nickell with a nod to '70s glam rock, "The Liar" impresses in just about every way possible.

You have David L. Arsenault's inspired set with its blood-red curtain, checkerboard floor, candle sconces and 3-D models of the play's Parisian estates; Tony Johnson's glam-inspired costumes (think lots of leather, lace and Spandex; and visual cues from David Bowie, punk rock and Alice Cooper); and sound designer Evan Middlesworth's original music recalling '70s rock hits, including "Heart of Glass" and "Fame" and inspired comic acting and Nickell's propulsive, tongue-in-cheek direction.

It all starts with a fantastic premise from playwright David Ives, who adapted a 1643 comedy by French playwright Pierre Corneille. But don't let that scare you, either: Ives practically rewrote the thing with new subplots, combined characters and updated references to iPhones and "verbal diarrhea."

The play opens with the title liar – a freshly minted lawyer (or maybe that’s a lie, too) arriving in Paris and promptly telling one whopper after another to impress the ladies. He’s a war hero. He’s married. He’s not married. The Queen once asked him to brunch.

Dorante (John Keabler) quickly hires a valet who can only speak the truth (Scott Aiello), and things get crazy and complicated from there: mistaken identities, multiple marriages, multiple twins, missing cruller doughnuts, jealous lovers and much, much more.

Keabler is obviously having fun onstage. His eyes gleam with lusty mischief as the lies pour from of his mouth. “The unimagined life,” he says with a grin, “is not worth living.”

Aiello’s valet is likable, schlubby and in obvious awe at his boss’s limitless ability to lie. It’s impossible not to laugh when he utters a disbelieving “Nooo!” at one particularly impressive whopper.

There’s not a weak actor in the bunch, but the most memorable performances include Alexis Hyatt’s formidable love interest Clarice; Maboud Ebrahimzadeh’s intense, ticked-off Alcippe (including some cool Michael Jackson dance moves); and particularly Kate Siepert as the twins Isabelle and Sabine – one is sexually aggressive, the other is an unapologetic sourpuss, but both are laugh-out-loud funny.

Put all this together, and you have one of the funniest shows you’ll likely see in Southwest Florida. And that’s no lie.