

LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES

By Pierre Chaderlos de Laclos

Adapted by Colin Duckworth

Melbourne French Theatre

Directed by Christiane Hille

Reviewed by Bruce Cochrane - 30 August 2008

The fact that Melbourne French Theatre continues to successfully contribute in cultural and theatrical terms after 31 years can be largely attributed to the ability of master showman/entrepreneur Michael Bula to keep attracting new talent and workers to the cause.

While other companies stumble with constant turnover of people and dwindling material support, Michael through a combination of charisma and imagination has managed to lead this company to greater heights.

Les Liaisons Dangereuses is not a simple undertaking, but this was a high standard production playing to a sell out crowd who bubbled with excitement pre show and after show.

With unstinting commitment in providing visual splendour both men and women wore magnificent aristocratic costumes (Belinda Davis designer) surrounded by antique furniture in an 18th century setting.

A large production team led by director Christiane Hille had clearly put a lot of time and effort into creating the scene for this spicy story of pernicious depravity skilfully adapted for the stage in French by prominent Melbourne academic Colin Duckworth from the book written in 1782.

On an expansive set cleverly designed by Amanda Roy we had various locations and an impressive bedroom on a split-level upstage plus a lighting design by Adam Grikepilis that enabled swift and smooth transitions through the numerous scenes and locations. Christiane Hille had designed a soundtrack which effectively employed short bursts of Baroque music to link scenes while cast members rapidly removed and reset furniture. As far as I am concerned this was competition standard for handling numerous scene changes and the only ingredient remaining to complete the work was the acting performances.

Thoroughly convincing as la Marquise de Verneuil cynical manipulator of sexual intrigue which saw young men and women used and cast off, Frédérique Fouchet employed all the gestures and expression acquired as a professional actress in France and Australia to assert her influence. Her slightly lesser embodiment of nastiness, Thomas Mainwaring as le Vicomte de Valmont had all the arrogance and self-absorption to strut his stuff convincingly though there was melodrama in the way he spoke to the audience rather than in their direction. While this made it harder to accept the transition to tragedy late in the play, the production did succeed in bringing out humour I had not previously seen in this work.

As the prey of these two schemers, Aurélia Gachet (Cecile) exuded charming naiveté and a natural flair for comedy; Katherine Payne (La Presidente de Tourvel) managed to convey anxiety before sexual awakening and ultimately devastation while Cédric Maruani as le Chevalier de Danceny had freshness in his honesty and earnestness to do the right thing.

Playing the older and wiser women struggling to keep abreast of the coming and goings in bedrooms, Gail Grove, Mme de Rosemonde was nicely composed with an impish sense of humour and Catherine Jackson-Grose as Mme de Volanges Cecile's mother showed grace and poise. Completing the group and at the other end of the social scale were the servants played by Eddie Fatha as Azolan and Camille Pronzato (in dual roles) as Julie and Marie. Eddie and Camille had the most scope for comedy and were energetic and enthusiastic in demonstrating that they were 'better than their masters'.

And so this adaptation of a classic that still endures after more than 200 years, gave us an enjoyable piece of high standard theatre with fine performances all round.

Felicitations tout le monde.

*Kellie Raymond as Marjorie and
Dean Mitchell as Raul in "Extremities"
presented by STAG -
Strathmore Theatrical Arts Group*