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“THE LIAR” OFFERS CHARMED DUPLICITY at HUDSON VALLEY SHAKESPEARE

by Abby Luby

If you've ever felt squeamish about the sing-songy rhymes of iambic pentameter, be assured that the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival production of *The Liar* uses this poetic form and is delightfully entertaining. The play has been wonderfully adapted and revived by David Ives from a comedy by 17th century French dramatist Pierre Corneille. We are forewarned in the very beginning that “tonight our actors will be speaking in verse,” but it is quickly apparent by the actors' well-timed delivery, that the verse won't drive you crazy. Rather, the discourse is broken up so nicely that we adapt to the poesy and eagerly anticipate the next rhymed word or pun, like the expected musical phrase of Mozart.

The story is straight forward. Dorante, a young man arrives in 17th century Paris and woos two young women by concocting grandiose tales. Dorante is played by Jason O'Connell, who brilliantly portrays the outwardly charming storyteller feeding his inner addiction to lie. O'Connell's Dorante is forgivable as a pathological liar because he weaves such incredulous tales that we crave the indulgence for a good story and are swept up in believing him. Dorante's servant is Cliton, played by a steadfast Michael Borrelli, the straight man who conversely can only tell the truth. Borrelli deftly gives us a solid unassuming character whose credible innocence we come to rely upon as a stable point of reference: when Cliton speaks his truths, it somehow releases the mounting tension of Dorante's lies. Dorante informs Cliton that “When someone's got a juicy tale to dish, I have to add some sauce, respice the fish.”

The men meet the alluring young ladies; Clarice, played by the superb comedienne Gabra Zackman, and Lucrece, blithely played by Katie Hartke, who despite her cunning and intuitive skepticism for men, falls for

Dorante lies and all. The women's similar sounding names is the entrée to a comedic feast of mistaken identities and adds to the already fertile ground of rampant duplicity.

New to HVSF is Max Hunter, adept as the high-strung Alcippe, to whom Clarice is secretly betrothed and who is Dorante's friend. Hunter's histrionics and palpitating anger is frenetically hilarious (think the maniacal Harvey Korman as Hedley Lamarr in *Blazing Saddles*). Unknowingly, an enrapt Alcippe listens to Dorante's extravagant romantic fantasy inspired by his infatuation with Clarice. It is a tale that quickly escalates into wild, fictional burlesque replete with "luminescent spume." When Alcippe realizes that Dorante is smitten with Clarice, he becomes fiercely jealous and forces Dorante to a duel. Dorante pretends to reach for his sword but his words are his true weapon. He slips into an energetic, high pitched sportscaster character and belts out a play-by-play sword fight which is totally imaginary. Alcippe never doubts that the fight isn't real and, like us, he is along for the ride with Dorante as the driver.



— L-R: Michael Borrelli, Gabra Zackman, Jason O'Connell.

Throughout the play O'Connell glibly intones snippets of impersonations: he slips mid sentence into Jack Nicholson in the *Shining* or instantly conjures Anthony Hopkins madly uttering "Clarice" from the *Silence of Lambs*. By the second and final act Dorante's imaginary well of fabrications has run dry and O'Connell's sublime body language of wrenching angst leaves no doubt he is desperately reaching deep into "his inner multiplex" for a new scenario.

Bawdy, scatological, lascivious, the characters' let loose their beastly alter egos that poke fun at sexual relationships: Dorante parades like a rooster, Alcippe breaks into fierce barking awaiting Clarice's response of soulful baying. Delightful puns and double entendre bubble up throughout: Dorante sees his new love interest as a clam and claims "You may be a bivalve, but you're my valve." The blundering but somehow loveable Geronte, Dorante's father, is astutely played by Stephen Paul Johnson and Maggie McDowell, with miraculous swiftness, jockeys back and forth between two roles of very identical but diabolically different twin sisters, as servants to Clarice and Lucrece.

Director Russell Treyz, whose past HVSF productions include *The 39 Steps* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, says in his program notes that Ives has called *The Liar* a “translaptation”—a combination of translation and adaptation. A grandiose opening uses the brassy sound track from one of the *Superman* movies to accompany the gallantry redolent of the *Three Musketeers*. Treyz includes several “freeze-frame” moments for actors’ asides to confide in the audience, giving us the inside scoop. Charlotte Palmer-Lane’s swashbuckling costumes for the men and low cut necklines and ballooning dresses for the women marvelously hint at parody, especially the flouncy, long curled bouffants. Ken Goldstein designed the stage props, a surprising number of pieces for the usual minimalist HVSF set, but they worked well, appearing heavy but light enough to moved around and easily reconfigured for the next scene.

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The HVSF 2014 season also includes Shakespeare’s *Othello* directed by Associate Artistic Director Christopher V. Edwards and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, directed by Eric Tucker, and previously reviewed in *Roll Magazine*. All three plays will be presented through August 31.

For 28 seasons the festival has performed in a beautiful, castle-like open-air theater tent on the grounds of historic Boscobel House and Gardens in Garrison, using the spectacular view of the Hudson River as a theatrical backdrop. For more information call the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival office at 845-809-5750, or visit www.hvshakespeare.org

Featured image, L-R: Michael Borrelli, Jason O’Connell. All photos by William Marsh.



Abby Luby is a writer/journalist based in Westchester County. www.abbylu.com