



Carise (Shizuka Moon) reassures Eglé (Hannah Hickman)

COURTESY OF UO DEPT. OF THEATRE ARTS

Temptation Forest

Innocent lust and the dangers of 18th century thought

Faux-irony, knowing winks and moments of hilarity pervade Marivaux's *La Dispute*, now playing at the UO's Arena Theater.

In the 18th century, you'll remember from Western history class, the Enlightenment loomed on the horizon. We celebrate that time when humankind released itself from the tyranny of the divine right of kings. Of course, as the order shook up, those in power imposed, instead, human bondage, bizarre experimentation and "scientific" examination on people of other classes and races.

But hey, the world was their playground, and it was *heck* of fun.

That's the time period when *La Dispute* was written, and the time period it reflects. The content reminded me of two books:

Lawrence Weschler's *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders*, a work of nonfiction about European mania for collecting other cultures, and M. T. Anderson's *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing*, a book of fiction about the capacity to regard other humans as possessions.

But Marivaux's humorous work, as he intended, stays light as the pastry of a profiterole. Campy and overblown from James Engberg's director's note to Lilli Turner's costumes, this production exudes arch pretension. Yet the hour-long work passes pleasantly enough as the audience laughs at the Romper-Room-gone-mad eyebrows of a noblewoman and the decapitation of innocent greenery. And the students performing in a riot of goofy destruction certainly seem to enjoy themselves.

In Marivaux's time, working from Locke's theory of the mind as a blank slate and from Rousseau's ideas of "natural man," various nobles ran "scientific" experiments on their social inferiors. That's not funny, we might think, but Marivaux uses that craze for experimentation ironically. His take on gender appeals to modern audiences for its now-transgressive essentialism, exploited in a muddled way at the UO by the use of camp and queer theory.

The play begins with a framing device. Enter two nobles — the woman, Hermiane (Rachael Davies), sporting those crazed eyebrows and an outfit combining the worst of 18th and 21st century fashion, and her haughty, white-powdered prince (Kevin Coubal). Their exquisitely artificial wigs point up their status as members of Civilization. These two have been arguing at court about whether men or women are more likely to cheat on each other. The Prince invites Hermiane to sit and watch this dispute in real time.

How? Twenty years earlier at his father's court, a similar argument occurred. Those nobles took four babies away from their families and raised them without any contact with other humans (including each other) save two foreign caretakers (Carise, played by Shizuka Moon, and Mesrou, played by Logan Cole). Now the young people will meet. Because they were formed without ideas of other humans, the Prince says, their interactions will prove something about

the state of natural gender roles — and provide an answer to the debate.

The plot provides many opportunities for laughs, and the performers, deliberately overacting and taking wicked pleasure in the gradual annihilation of the set, leap (often literally) at the chance. Eglé (Hannah Hickman), the first young person to come on stage, meets Azor (Jake Pippin), who falls for her immediately. But Eglé's narcissistic self-regard means more to her than does Azor, despite her attraction to him.

Men adore; woman are adored, and when women meet — as when Eglé meets Adine (Jessica Graff) — they fight. But when Azor and Mesrin (Craig Lamm) run into each other, they hit it off in slightly homoerotic fashion even as they proclaim adoration for their girlfriends. Complications ensue, but, with a trashed set, a new world for the youth and another amusement for the royal group, all ends pretty well.

Except that the young people remain playthings of the nobles, and except that the servants/caretakers are the only people of color in the cast. Those uncomfortable reminders of injustice and slavery smack against the neatly wrapped narrative. Still, it's not impossible to laugh during the play and consider its implications later. Besides, *La Dispute* provides an affordable, enjoyable date night opportunity in the middle of a theater season fraught with intensity. Just watch out for flying shrubbery. **EW**

La Dispute continues Nov. 1-3 at the UO's Arena Theatre in Villard Hall. Tix available at 346-4363.

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