

Les Liaisons Dangereuses
by Christopher Hampton, directed by Daniel Henning
2/6 through 3/27/2005
2nd Stage

In a veritable feast for the eyes, director Daniel Henning has modernized Christopher Hampton's moral masterpiece of seduction and revenge, and placed it in the late Roaring Twenties.

Le Vicomte de Valmont (David Starzyk) and La Marquise de Merteuil (Robin Riker) are ex-lovers who have turned seduction into a game. Together they try to impress and outdo each other, corrupting the young and innocent, and toying with the unsuspecting, without a thought to the emotional wreckage they leave in their wake. For Valmont and the Marquise, people are objects to be used and discarded, trophies that prove their own emotional immunity from the petty human drama incited by that pesky issue - love.

In exchange for helping her exact revenge on an ex-lover by deflowering his lovely, virginal, and recently ex-convented fiancé Cecile (Annie Abrams), the Marquise will grant Valmont her favors. Valmont, at first disinterested due to the excruciating ease with which he feels he can conquer the child, refuses, since he has set his sights on the far more challenging Présidente de Tourvel (Ginger Williams), a pious, married, faithful beauty whose husband has been, and will be for a long time, out of town. She would be his crowning achievement. However, due to a complicated series of events that would place the formerly un-enticing Cecile squarely in the center of his own revenge, he accepts the Marquise's challenge.

Joanne Baker & Ryan Cassidy's set (considering the limited stage space), splendidly captures the era, although the choice of toy-sized easy chair is a mystery - especially when the sizeable Valmont has to lower and wedge himself into it. Likewise, the game table unnecessarily takes up much real estate. Steven Young's lighting, and K.C. Braunschwig's music are likewise complimentary. Dana Peterson, doing double duty as both costume designer and Madam de Volanges (Cecile's mother), has excelled at both, providing what must be the most luscious wardrobe west of the Mississippi, and a touching portrayal of a mother hen helplessly fretting over her precious daughter's inevitable seduction.

Almost the entire cast, in fact, has turned in exceptionally fine performances. Irene Roseen is grand as Valmont's aunt Rosemonde; Annie Abrams' Cecile is a delight; Ginger Williams as the puritanical prey Tourvel, is indeed chaste and conflicted, but the seething passions she cannot control remain concealed. Allen Egelista, Joanna Kelly, Aaron Kleven, and Alan Doshna, all find colors in their supporting roles. And then there is Robin Riker who is simply delicious as the Marquise. Gorgeous, sensual, wicked, delightful, Riker's voice is as mesmerizing as she is, toying with her many victims with feline grace, beauty, and cruelty. Her performance is seamless, profound and chilling, an utter chameleon. Starzyk, on the other hand, while the

very manifestation of Valmont, is not up to the considerable challenge of master manipulator. From his mannerisms, which are way too modern, to his delivery, Starzyk's moods are indistinguishable from one another. He is either seducing or blustering, never molding himself to his quarry's needs and moods to achieve his ends. His is not a manipulative, seductive Valmont, but a forceful, brutish bully. In his arms, Cecile is not seduced, but raped. Most importantly, his feelings towards Tourvel - the only genuine ones he has ever had - are indistinguishable from those he has for Cecile and Emilie. Thus, the climax of the play - where his actions and feelings are "beyond my control" - lacks the gut-wrenching self-destruction such a break-up would naturally engender, and renders the ensuing duel rather senseless.

The other exception to this marvelous cast is the silent maid (Sydney Shapiro), who hovers quietly in the background. In what is the clearest illustration that "there are no small parts", she wordlessly elicits one of the first laughs of the evening, but her relaxed and grunge-like stance and movements betray the otherwise carefully constructed period piece. God is in the details, and how we move and speak changes from era to era.

Henning has carefully constructed a Coward-esque rendition of *Liaisons*, successfully transferring this 18th Century story of sexual manners and manipulation into a credible early 20th century setting, complete with the final political denouement. With the exception of some minor, tired blocking choices and actor wandering, this is a fine example of theatre at its best.