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Cruel Directions

Posted by Jer in Theatre



photos by Randy Cole

In my [preview post](#) about the Segal Center's season-opening *Dangerous Liaisons*, I said it was sure to be a raunchy affair guaranteed to make even the stuffiest of theatre go-ers hot under the collar. After having seen the show, it's true that the play is risky business, but sex only sells so far.

The story, adapted from a 1782 French novel, is a tale of seduction, lies, and jealousy. The two lead characters, ex-lovers, work through their feelings for each other by teasing, tempting and taking advantage of the other hapless men, women, boys and girls around them. In this play, sex is both the quest and the reward; power and a defense mechanism.

The Segal's staging of the tale raises some tough gender issues. The play's depiction of women is both dated and progressive. The lead male character, the Vicomte de Valmont, treats women like it was 1782; they are mere conquests for him. But, his ex, the Marquise de Merteuil, provides relief, using her brains and body as power, constantly putting the males around her in their place. In this light, the scenes of near sexual assault are likely as disturbing to today's audiences as the scenes of liberal female sexuality and staunch independence were to audiences of previous centuries.



The actors, of course, have the toughest job. Much of the play involves close contact acting, with heated arguments or bouts of courtship. They also have to contend with several high-profile films of the play (*Dangerous Liaisons*, *Cruel Intentions*) and the expectations that actors in those movies have set for the audience. Still, most of the crew manage pull it off. Brett Christopher is excellently vile, swaggering around stage as Valmont. Throughout the play he maintains a delicate balance between pompous and charming, teasing the audience into liking him, only to repulse them moments later. Catherine de Seve also stands out. Her take on the Marquise was hard to warm up to for the first few scenes, but as the play moves along, it becomes clear that's exactly the point of her character. She doesn't want to let you in. She's been burned too many times and now she plans to keep her cool. Talented supporting actors round out the cast, bringing light laughs when things get too serious (Jake Epstein offers some wonderfully naive comic relief).

Unfortunately, much of the on-stage talent is obscured by poor directorial decisions. Director Alexandre Marine indulges a few too many flights of fancy. First there are the aesthetic issues like the soundtrack, which begins subtly as an ambient backdrop to the action but turns into a heavy hammer. By the end, every key plot twist or joke seems scored like a Saturday morning cartoon. Then there are practical problems. In order to simulate snow for the final sword fight scene, Marine has his characters fencing on a white bedsheet held down only by other cast members. With fancy footwork on such treacherous terrain, the audience was likely as anxious about the play's conclusion as they were about one of the actors spraining an ankle.

The result is that key parts of the play get lost in the action. de Seve has a monologue in the first act in which she stands up for the role of women in a world that often treats them like objects. It's a key passage for the audience, especially in light of the nasty turns the play is about to take. Instead of letting the lines speak for themselves, Marine has a chorus of cast members dancing and simulating sex in the background. Not exactly the best way to focus attention on the speaker.

Despite these slight missteps, the issues the play raises still resonate hundreds of years later. The Segal's season continues next month with another classic, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Again they are promising passion, but let's hope that director Greg Kramer ensures that the sizzle doesn't take away from the substance.

Dangerous Liaisons runs until Sept. 28 at the Segal (5170 Côte-Ste-Catherine, MTL) :
Monday - Thursday, 8:00 pm, Saturday 8:30 pm, Sunday 7:00 pm
Matinées: Wednesdays 1:00 pm, Sundays 2:00 pm