



COMMEDIA DELL'ARTEMISIA
reviewed by Ishah Janssen-Faith (6/17/07)

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A strong willed woman, fueled by the desire to escape the tight hold of her money-grubbing father, compromises her chastity for the promise of marriage to a unscrupulous man about town. The Stolen Chair Theatre Company has taken this seeming fodder for melodrama and transposed it onto the challenging form of commedia dell'arte, complete with beautifully crafted masks and perfectly suited versatile set design. The combination proves fruitful in theory, if slightly less so in practice.

At the center of the action is the rape of the young Artemisia by the smooth-talking cad Tassi. It is not viewed as rape at first as the two have made an arrangement of sorts; he will deflower her now and marry her later. He fulfills the first part of this deal, albeit a little forcefully, but manages to slither out of the latter. When Artemisia's father is alerted to this transgression, he immediately brings Tassi to trial for the rape of his daughter.

Kiran Rikhye's script is clever in its rhyming couplets and witty turns of phrase, and gives the audience rich food for thought. In the trial scene in particular, a clear dig at a few current real and fictional scenarios is made with "You're having her tortured? It's the only way / Without that, heaven knows what the witness would say." Rikhye then piles on still more satires of contemporary culture. At the close of the play, she leaves us with the notion that Artemisia will profit from her torture; that she will be known throughout history, if not for her art, at least for being a victim. I found this the most effective of all the satirizing, achieving a key component of commedia by holding up the mirror to the particularly American trait of "making lemonade out of lemons" and asking, is this a stalwart quality to

be praised? Or is it just another way of morally justifying an immoral buck?

As for the rape, I am not a squeamish audience member, so when I say I cringed at the rape scene, it was not due to the subject matter. My feeling of unease stemmed from what felt to me as a too polite staging (and perhaps a slight sense of embarrassment or apology from the actors performing it). Wearing those masks and playing those stock commedia characters is meant to free the actor, director, and writer to completely embody the essence of the one color, whether it be greed, stupidity, innocence, or pomposity, with utter abandon and sheer fun. But I didn't feel that here, and it struck me as a possibly lost opportunity.

Overall though, the company does put a good foot forward with this show. Cameron J. Oro, as Tassi, has an amazingly commanding voice, and precisely the light quality of movement needed for such demanding work. David Bengali, as the miserly father Orazio, transforms into an old man with a nimble and wiry quality needed for such a conflicted character. The fact that he also designed the lights and the extremely clever set can only mean he is a true virtuoso. The women of the cast hold their own with these two masked men. Liza Wade White plays both the title role and the judge, the latter with more abandon and fun than the former. Layna Fisher fits the bill nicely as the nosy, meddling, morally loose neighbor Tuzia.

There is a lot to grab onto with this piece, a lot to mull over. Was it rape? Was it consensual? What is fame? Why do certain people get in the history books? Is torture useful? The company is clearly on the right path with regards to its mission of creating "visually stunning and uniquely contemporary work where the earnest and ironic happily co-exist", now they just need to take the gloves off and come out punching.