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Triumph of Love: Make Our Garden Grow



Author Bio



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Monday, April 28, 2008; Posted: 5:53 PM - by [Duncan Pflaster](#)

I can see why people *thought* a musical of Marivaux's 1732 *The Triumph of Love* would be a good idea- the original play is witty and intriguing, and with one set and a cast of seven, it's easy to produce.

Unfortunately, the musical adaptation, with book by James Magruder, lyrics by [Susan Birkenhead](#), and Music by Jeffrey Stock, which played 85 performances on Broadway in 1997, sacrifices the wit and subtlety for some seriously lame jokes. Astoria Performing Arts Center gives the show a fine production with an excellent cast, but even they can't save the terrible script.

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The plot: In Athens, A brother and sister team of intellectual ascetics, Hesione (Erika Amato) and Hermocrates (Richard Rice Alan), have raised their nephew Agis (Tripp Pettigrew) in a garden away from all outside influence, including all women but his aunt. Agis happens to be the true prince of Sparta, and now that he's old enough, he is to be

sent to reclaim his throne from the usurping Princess Leonide, to turn Sparta into a land of Reason. Meanwhile, Leonide ([Abby Baum](#)) has fallen in love with Agis, and knowing that women are not allowed in the garden, dresses as a boy, with the help of her comic servant Corine (Ashley Speigel), who immediately ends up getting it on with both the other comic servants Harlequin ([Philip Deyesso](#)) and Dimas (Justin Birdsong). The costume fools some and takes in others till Leonide is engaged to everyone else in the play. As shouldn't be a surprise to anyone, Love triumphs..

The script has its faults, but it occasionally works when the authors just let the situation and the characters just be funny- Agis is meant to be the straight man, but some of the funniest moments in the play come from his honest reactions to the insanity around him. Conversely, the *shtick* the poor clowns are given is painfully unfunny, either labored *Commedia* bits or irritatingly anachronistic puns, none of which go far enough to actually get at the humor, like someone making a translation without understanding the meaning. My friend and I thought some of the horrifying puns and single entendres were ad-libbed in rehearsal, but no, they're in the script.

The cast is great, and does their best with the frequently feeble material. Ms. Baum is an excellent Leonide, giving a depth of character to what could have been a fluffy role. The handsome Mr. Pettigrew is very funny and appropriately naive as Agis, though he seems to have been directed to fly into a rage at the drop of a hat. Ms. Amato shows off a glorious voice as Hesione- her song "Serenity" is a highlight of the evening (as it was for Tony- and Drama Desk-nominated Betty Buckley in the original cast). Mr. Alan is a stern Hermocrates, to watch him soften into love is a delight. Ms. Speigel is radiant as Corine, and belts out the incongruous Kander and Ebb



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pastiche "Mr. Right" with aplomb. Deyesso and Birdsong labor painfully under the weight of the script, the unfortunate clowns trying to make the material work; at least their singing voices are excellent. Direction by Brian Swasey is brisk and gleeful, helped along by Michael P. Kramer's beautiful set (which for some reason has a fountain in the middle that is barely acknowledged). Adam Coffia's costumes are lovely, and Erik J. Michael's lighting design is beautiful. The musical direction by Jeffrey Campos is great, leading his 4-piece orchestra (Cyrus Collier, Renia Shukis, Stephen Pfeiffer, and Russ Nyberg).



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- 1. Justin Birdsong, [Philip Deyesso](#), Tripp Pettigrew, and Erika Amato
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Duncan Pflaster is an award-winning playwright (2 time winner, Spotlight On Award, "Best New Play" 2005 and 2006), whose plays have been produced in Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, and New York. He also has been known to direct, write music, play the ukulele, and (if his arm is twisted) act.

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