

## Critics' Forum

### Theater

#### A Triumphant "Love's Labor's Lost"

By Aram Kouyoumdjian



In some quarters of the literary world, "Love's Labor's Lost" is considered one of Shakespeare's "lesser" comedies. After seeing its recent incarnation by the Actors' Gang, you'd never believe it. In director Simon Abkarian's hands, "Love's Labor's Lost" (playing through September 30 at the Ivy Substation), is a visual feast of choreography and color that achieves a delicate balance between levity and profundity.

Perhaps better known in the United States for his film acting – he portrayed Arshile Gorky in Atom Egoyan's "Ararat," starred with Joan Allen in Sally Potter's "Yes," and plays a villain in the latest James Bond installment, "Casino Royale" – Abkarian, who is based in France, boasts impressive theater credentials (including a Moliere Award) and experience in the commedia dell'arte style, which he puts to great use in "Love's Labor's Lost."

The premise of the play itself is somewhat weak, even silly. Essentially, the King of Navarre and his lords join in an oath to give up the temptations of their physical world – including the lure of women – and devote themselves to three years of scholarship. This being Shakespeare, however, no sooner have they committed to this oath than the Princess of France appears on the scene, with her ladies in tow. Temptations are re-awakened, love letters dispatched and accidentally switched, and identities mistaken. Romantic upheaval ensues.

Perhaps "Love's Labor's Lost" does have the makings of a "lesser" comedy. Abkarian, however, makes it bloom into a masterwork of imagination, awash in surreal images and gorgeous stylized movement, all bathed in luminous light. To be sure, Abkarian mines the play's humor and lends to it an absurdist sensibility. Yet, the boldness of his tableaux

(among them, striking variations on the crucifixion theme) and his keen sense of the play's shifting moods ensure that "Love's Labor's Lost" is elevated from a "lesser" comedy to an emotionally complex and sexually charged piece of theater.

A sequence in which the King and his lords disguise themselves as Russians to secretly mingle with the Princess and her ladies, for instance, serves as an exemplar of farcical chaos, featuring masks, confetti, and vigorous dancing in a brilliant bit of pandemonium.

Still, the comedy, while integral to the production's lively spirit, never compromises the play's emotional heft and its treatment of deeper questions of love and coupling. When the King and his lords finally realize the extent of their loneliness in the absence of the women they've come to love, their clingy embrace of one another, while funny, is even more heartbreaking. In the course of comprehending love, these characters undergo an awakening and maturation that Abkarian's actors capture and communicate with poignancy.

Indeed, a young, energetic cast executes Abkarian's ambitious staging with poise. Brian Kimmet and Ethan Kogan are well suited as lords to Matt Huffman's King. Huffman brings to the role a vulnerability that proves quite moving, while Nancy Stone, as the Princess, offers a perfect blend of strength and grace. Among the characters populating the play's less-successful subplots, Mary Eileen O'Donnell crafts a memorable turn as Holofernes, proving that sometimes the best man for the part may well be a woman.

The production greatly benefits from the talents of its design team, including Francois-Pierre Couture, who does double duty with sets and lighting, both to stellar effect. Sarah Le Feber's modern costumes (at times, lingerie-inspired) manage to be smart and sensual in their elegant simplicity. And Ara Dabandjian's musical score, much of which he plays live on stage, sublimely accentuates the action.

As breathtaking in its interpretation as Eric Tucker's industrial take on "Macbeth" was last year, Abkarian's production proves, once again, that Shakespeare's words, as lauded as they may be, are only a starting point to an unforgettable theatrical experience.

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