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Shakespeare Theatre unearths comic gem

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"THE PLAY'S THE THING"

The headlines are full of show-business types who find trouble when they confuse real life with the scripts that make them stars. Why worry about consequences if you can just fix it in rewrite?

Playwright Ferenc Molnar identified this contemporary attitude in "The Play's the Thing," which opened Saturday at the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey in Madison, but was written in 1926. His thoughtful observations on the nature of theater are fuel for lively discussion, but mostly, Molnar's "Thing" is played for fun. The end result is a farce that will make intellectuals and theater insiders snicker, while the rest of us can just laugh ourselves silly.

Molnar doesn't get a lot of face time on modern stages, but "The Play's the Thing" is just one of 18 of his plays that made it to Broadway. Fortunately, the Shakespeare Theatre's expanded 2007 season allows a few extra detours from the usual rotation of classics to explore this fertile ground.

Director Joe Discher's program notes provide some useful information: "Molnar was keenly interested in exploring the thin and often disappearing line between reality and illusion, between life and strange." So it's no surprise when three characters begin discussing alternate writings of the scene they inhabit.

Writing, rewriting and orchestrating the movements of characters comes naturally to Sandor (Mark Jacoby), a prominent playwright recently arrived as a guest to an elegant castle on the Italian Riviera. Sandor is there with his collaborator, Mansky (Colin McPhillamy), and his young composer, Albert (Jared Zeus), to sell their new operetta.

Sandor arranged for their suite (Jesse Dreikosen's set is convincingly opulent) to share doors with the lovely and talented prima donna, Ilona (Caralyn Kozlowski), also recently betrothed to Albert. Sandor hopes the close quarters will bring them all together on the operetta, but Albert is shattered when they overhear Ilona succumb to the advances of her former lover and stage mentor, Almady (Robert Gomes).

Thankfully, Molnar's clever farce treats the unfortunately aforementioned plot with the dignity it deserves -- he rewrites it, in a manner of speaking, to illustrate its absurdity and orchestrate the happy ending this sort of thing demands. Even then, "The Play's the Thing" veers from convention, telegraphing the inevitability of the happy ending, then dragging it out with some playfully sadistic comedy, humiliating the pompous actor, Almady, in a way only a playwright can.

Molnar also skewers critics with his sharp pen. When Mansky suggests adding violence to a play, Sandor says, "Critics dislike bloodshed. If there's to be any blood, they prefer to draw it themselves."

Jacoby revels in Sandor's shiny shoes, standing in for Molnar as he thinks faster than everyone else. Looking elegant in a tuxedo and a purple silk dinner jacket, he brims with confidence knowing that with strong direction, any end can be achieved.

The only thing he cannot do is remember the name of the ubiquitous butler, Dwornitscheck, who's always available because he only sleeps during the offseason. John Little is a giant in a comparatively small role, instilling this gentlemen's gentleman with dry humor and some impressively vertical posture. At the short end of the castle staff is Greg Jackson as Mr. Mell, a bespeckled, nervous little man who goes atwitter at the slightest surprise.

Little and Jackson rival the leads for laughs in every scene they're in. But this cast of seven has nothing resembling a weak link. Kozlowski, a company veteran, looks every bit the blond diva and is a skilled physical comedian as well. She got two of the biggest laughs of the night simply by sitting down. As Mansky, British actor McPhillamy is the perfect, blustery Ed McMahon to Jacoby's smooth Johnny. Gomes squirms delightfully as a failed lothario enduring professional indignity to cover his shame.

Another treat for Shakespeare Theatre regulars is to see Zeus, another company veteran, rise to a more featured role. He makes the most of it, investing Albert with some convincing, youthful naiveté, then making fun of it in a way that would no doubt make Molnar proud.