

Theater review: Mountain Community Theater takes on period melodrama with style

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Deceptions? Check. Bawdy behavior? Check. Buxom ladies? Check. Masters trading places with servants? Check.

Sounds like Shakespeare, but in reality, "The Beaux' Stratagem," now creating mayhem and madcap comedy at Park Hall in Ben Lomond, has had a circuitous history since it was first written in 1707 by British playwright George Farquhar as a "late Restoration comedy." It would likely have been forgotten by now if renowned playwright Thornton Wilder ("Our Town") hadn't begun to adapt it in 1939. Although he never finished it, his estate asked "Lend Me a Tenor" playwright Ken Ludwig to complete the adaptation.

ADVERTISING

As a result, the "new" version premiered in 2006 at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington. Since then, "The Beaux' Stratagem" has had several productions in England and in various college and community theaters in the U.S. Nevertheless, it's seldom produced, most likely because it's still a stretch to appreciate its nuances and rather archaic human interactions.

That aside, Mountain Community Theater's production, creatively directed by Scott Whisler and with a "pull-out-all-the-stops" cast, is worth taking a giant step back in British history to see. It's not without its faults — including the exceptionally long time it takes before the audience is engaged in the characters and their shenanigans — but once it starts rolling, the ride is mostly worth the wait.

The plot centers on two handsome young men, suave Tom Aimwell (a rather bland Nik Beiden) and his more adventurous friend Jack Archer (a believable Nat Robinson sporting perhaps the largest mutton-chop sideburns ever grown). With 200 British pounds between them, they set off to find a rich heiress to improve their fortunes. Archer poses as Aimwell's man servant to feign the appearance of wealth. Arriving in Staffordshire in the city of Litchfield, Aimwell sets his sights on Dorinda (Cassandra Stipes), daughter of the town "healer" Lady Bountiful (a hilarious turn by Hannah Eckstein, especially her Brunhilda scene) while Archer toys with both an innkeeper's daughter, Cherry (Alie MacBird) as well as the married Kate Sullen (Shireen Doyle).

This only skims the surface of what happens in this 20-person melodrama. There is skullduggery, drunkenness, romance, sword fighting and more (oh, my!). On a number of occasions, one actor or another walks to the front of the stage and talks directly to the audience, even engaging a guest to assist with a prop. And, for some unfathomable reason, Lady Gaga gets a mention in the midst of all the tomfoolery.

Besides the aforementioned Ms. Eckstein, Marty Lee Jones as Lady Bountiful's drunken lout of a son Squire Sullen stands out. He rants, he roars, he curses and falls off couches, (almost) throws a chair and is thoroughly convincing as a rotter who cares for nothing but his next dram. Picking himself up from his frequent falls to the floor, he looks at the audience innocently and says with a grin, "Whoopsie." Scott Karvitz is good as the crooked innkeeper, but he especially excels as Fiogard, a priest summoned to marry Aimwell and Dorinda. It's a clever bit when Fiogard looks toward the lights to summon a spotlight before he is willing to perform the marriage ceremony.

Other than Eckstein, the lead women don't fare as well as their male counterparts. Though Stipes has a lovely face and hair, she frequently speaks too quickly and softly, so some of what she says is lost. Doyle has by far the larger role, and though she occasionally convinces, at other times her body twitches and she rocks up and down in her shoes.

One of Whisler's best choices is to weave the many set changes into the fabric of the play. Credit Elise Whisler as the maid in charge of the three other set crew/actors who are dressed in period costumes and who imbibe liberally of ale and other spirits as they move around furniture. Whistler also throws a stuffed duck/bird in the air every time someone shoots off a gun. She methodically changes the clock forward or backward before every scene, which sometimes slows the action. But, for the most part, the set changes are amusing to watch.

This is quite an ambitious undertaking for the little theater company that has been going strong for 32 years. It's worth the drive to Ben Lomond just to hear the sloshed Jones say "Getting married is easy enough; it's staying married that's tough."

{THROUGH March 2, Mountain Community Theater, Park Hall, 9400 Mill St., Ben Lomond. \$10-\$20. Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 2 p.m. www.mctshows.org or www.brownpapertickets.com}