

Port City Playhouse Takes on Hypocrisy and Gullibility in "Tartuffe"

Theater Review
By Brad Hathaway
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A scene from "Tartuffe" From left to right, Stacey Lane Smith, James Howard, Laura Russell and Cassie Lee.

Port City Playhouse's new production of the 17th century comedy "Tartuffe," which opened a three week run at the Nannie J. Lee Center, gives a spin to what has long been considered Molière's skewering of religious hypocrisy to focus as well on the lampooning of the gullibility of upper class society in the France of Louis XIV.

Molière wrote the play in 1664, but it was banned at first due to the outraged reaction of the clergy in Paris. That initial reaction has colored the reputation of the play over the centuries, making it famous for its satiric attack on religious pretension. This has overshadowed its barbs about how easily some people can be duped.

Director Bob Bartlett brings an even-handed approach to the dual targets of the play, treating the text as written and not overlaying any interpretive layers which could cloud the view of the author's intentions. However, Bartlett has an uneven cast which makes the production frustratingly patchy.

In Bruce Alan Rauscher as the con-man Tartuffe, he has an actor who sparks the energy level of any production in which he plays. Here, with all the machinations of this smooth talking, fast moving and supremely confident con-man, Rauscher appears to be having the time of his life spinning a web of foolishness which he alone recognizes. As always, it is a pleasure to watch him work.

Opening night of the production saw some rough edges still showing, but there were some bright spots in the balance of the cast as well. Eileen Farrell was marvelously haughty as she played a matron who sets up the central concept of the comedy, but she seemed to be addressing the audience rather than the household. With more interaction, the opening scene might have established the attitudes in her son's household into which Rauscher's Tartuffe has insinuated himself.

AL FETSKE WAS UNABLE to spark the kind of fun required as the head of the household Tartuffe is systematically undermining. Laura Russell, and Joseph McMahon as his wife, and son are fine, each establishing a clear characterization as the events begin to swirl about them. Russell is particularly good at portraying what today would be referred to as a trophy wife, but Stacey Lane Smith as the daughter in the household is called upon to whine through other characters' scenes, an irritating and distracting affectation.

James Howard takes on the role of the head of the household's brother-in-law and it falls to him to try to establish a number of the important plot points once Farrell's character has departed. He's an avuncular figure in his gold vest but many of the points simply don't register.

Bartlett and actor Bruce Ward (who plays the officer in the second half of the show) came up with a set design that is utilitarian and slightly confusing as the cross at the back, complete with purple drape, emphasizes the lampooning of religious pretensions at the same time that the action is focusing on the gullibility plotline.

The supporting designs include Susan Kovalik Tully's timeless formal wear costumes and Brian Donohue's sound design which includes a number of musical quotes from the soundtracks of classic biblical epics with a sly cheekiness.

WHERE & WHEN

"Tartuffe" plays through May 8 at the Nannie J. Lee Center, 1108 Jefferson Street. Performances are Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. as well as a Tuesday evening performance on April 30. Tickets are \$10 - \$12. Reservations can be made by calling 703-838-2880 or by logging on to www.portcityplahouse.com