

Theater Review

## 'Tartuffe': Antique Comedy Has Modern Resonance

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Stacey Lane Smith (Mariane), from left, James Howard (Cléante), Laura Russell (Elmire) and Cassie Lee (Dorine) play in Port City Playhouse's "Tartuffe," which concludes this weekend. (Douglas Olmsted)

Actors live for dramatic entrances, and Bruce Rauscher certainly has one playing the title role in "Tartuffe," the barbed 17th century comedy by Molière that has received a modern facelift by Alexandria's Port City Playhouse.

Tartuffe, a charming hypocrite who with pretensions of piety has insinuated himself into control of a well-to-do Parisian household, is talked about for two full acts (in a five-act play) before we meet him. When he finally appears onstage, accompanied by swelling music that sounds as though it's lifted from the soundtrack of a Bible epic, he is bent over, carrying a large wooden cross on his back, a striking image of holiness. But then one notices the cigarette incongruously stuck behind an ear. And when his sharp eyes reveal that no member of the household is present, his first utterance, tossed off indifferently to his ubiquitous, oily factotum Laurent (Manolo Santalla), is a command to "hang up my hair shirt."

Rauscher has a rich comedic role to showcase his talents, pious poses balanced against consuming lust and duplicity rolled into cunning but indolent self-absorption. He attacks the role with gusto, creating a nonstop parade of shtick. It is funny -- very funny, in fact. But the over-the-top performance does obscure the satirical underpinnings of Molière's sharp poke at hypocrisy among people and in the church. That poke caused the French king to ban the work 340 years ago, with energetic approval from leaders of the church.

Director Bob Bartlett has infused this production with a thoroughly modern sensibility, using a translation by British playwright Christopher Hampton that streamlines Molière's ornate language, replacing the rhymes with blank verse. Bartlett has set the story in modern Paris, although time and place have little relationship to Molière's enduring themes, as vivid today in John Ashcroft's America as they were in the reign of Louis XIV.

In a nod to current political winds, Bartlett has Orgon (Al Fetske), the rich head of the household, keep a cloth draped over a statue deemed too revealing by the hypocrite Tartuffe. For his part, Tartuffe implores the maid Dorine (Cassie Lee) to cover up her "devil's dumplings," even as he ogles them.

Rauscher has the flashy title role, but it is Fetske who provides the framework on which the satire hangs. Orgon is so bamboozled by Tartuffe that he plans to make him his son-in-law and heir, against the wishes of whiny daughter Mariane (Stacey Lane Smith).

Fetske fleshes out a gruff but endearing man with an air of pathos, turning in a performance much more subtle than Rauscher's but just as striking, and hitting nary a false note as the character finds himself manipulated almost to the point of losing all he holds dear.

Tartuffe finally goes too far, attempting to seduce Orgon's clear-eyed wife Elmire (Laura Russell), who then schemes to expose the charlatan's hypocrisy and thus rid the household of the parasite.

Speaking in a fluty voice, Russell slyly wraps Elmire's craftiness in a sensuous package and manages impeccable comic timing in the seduction scene in which she plans to trap and expose Tartuffe.

The opening scene is worrisome. Bartlett has eight members of the 13-actor cast lined up side-by-side, speaking more to the audience than each other. It is static, flat and boring, but the director soon has some of the actors moving about the simple set with the exaggerated, clownish motions of *commedia dell'arte* that informed much of Molière's work. Scenes of dialogue between two characters, of which there are many, turn into balletlike verbal skirmishes broadly played for laughs.

Some of the supporting actors don't seem fully on board the circus train, and Molière's mastery is diluted by translation and shtick, but this "Tartuffe" is mostly enjoyable.

*"Tartuffe," performed by Port City Playhouse at the Lee Center, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria, concludes this weekend. Showtime is 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For tickets, call the box office at 703-838-2880. For more information, visit [www.portcityplayhouse.com](http://www.portcityplayhouse.com).*