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Dangerous Liaisons

by Christopher Hampton

***Plays April 22nd through
May 21st, 2005***

Actors' Theatre in Santa Cruz

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REVIEW from Watsonville [Register-Pajaronian](#) by Joyce Mann

***Dangerous Liaisons* a glittering, timeless tale of seduction**

Apr 29 2005 12:00AM

Pisces Moon's latest production, Christopher Hampton's "Dangerous Liaisons," brings a tantalizing story of love, revenge, hedonism, decadence, seduction and ultimate tragedy to Actors' Theatre in Santa Cruz.

Based on an 18th-century novel by French writer Choderlos de Laclos, the play tells the story of an affluent and aristocratic society, where boredom and sheer lack of conscience lead to games of sexual manipulation and heartbreak.

Valmont (Christopher Sugarman) is the seducer par excellence. His former lover the Marquise de Merteuil (Becky Armor) uses him to seduce Cecile (Amy Rose Capetta), the teenage daughter of her cousin Madame de Volange (Julie Kapp). Her motive is revenge on a former lover who is to marry Cecile. The

young girl thinks she's in love with her dance teacher Danceny (Michael Olavson), who is definitely persona non grata. To put icing on the cake, as Valmont seduces Cecile, Merteuil seduces Danceny.

In addition, Merteuil persuades Valmont to seduce the prudish Madame de Tourvel (Heather Huber-Brown). This piece of mischief is obviously a whim, to prove that the dominating Merteuil can bend Valmont to her will. Valmont seduces both women at the home of his aunt, Madame de Rosemonde (Helene Simkin Jara).

While the basic premise of the play is simple, the convolutions of the plot are complex. The success of the production depends as much on style as anything else. Hampton's dialogue is witty and cleverly written, and the play certainly has literary merit.

Heading up a particularly strong cast, Sugarman, Armor and Huber-Brown all do excellent jobs with their key roles. Sugarman ranges from persuasive to intimidating. He finally becomes a victim of his own ploys when the unthinkable happens, and he falls in love. Armor is an excellent actor and makes good use of her wide range of physical, facial and vocal skills. She and Sugarman have some great scenes together. Huber-Brown brings a waif-like quality to her role of the repressed Tourvel. As her love for Valmont develops, she displays a wide range of emotions.

In supporting roles, Katie Vroom plays the saucy and vivacious courtesan Emilie with great aplomb. Olavson has his moments as Danceny; he comes over as a simple soul who is no match for Merteuil. Simkin Jara gives a good, solid performance as Valmont's aunt. Kapp's air of naivete provides a nice contrast with Armor's duplicity. Aaron Walker is noticeable in the small role of Azolan, Valmont's manservant.

The play is a challenge for director Susan Myer Siltan, and she handles the large cast and numerous scene changes with rarely a false step. The play maintains a good pace; however, the ensemble scene needs tightening up. The duel scene between Valmont and Danceny is a tour de force, so kudos to whomever arranged it.

It's Siltan's vision of the play, though, that underlies this production. With clever use of sets and costumes, she draws the parallel between the decadent world of Laclos and the hedonistic environment in which we now live.

Kathryn Hart's dazzling costume design is an integral part of the play and speaks to the director's intent. The outer shells of the dresses are

definitely 18th century. However, they cloak a modern look, with mini-skirts and mesh stockings, while the glittering accessories provide a hint of the future. This unusual approach is extremely effective and brings an air of timelessness to the play.

Roger McCune (set designer) makes excellent use of space and stage levels. His futuristic set cleverly hints at the elegance of 18th-century France. It provides eight discrete sets with minimal set changes. Randy Birch's sound design is interesting and covers a wide spectrum from near liturgical to modern rock.

Choderlos de Laclos' novel has spawned a number of works, of which "Dangerous Liaisons" is one. Other versions of the story include "Valmont" and "Cruel Intentions." It's interesting to ponder why this story has taken such a grip on the imagination over the centuries.

In Pisces Moon's reinterpretation of this well-known play, a highly stylized futuristic society is the setting for a terrible game of lust, seduction and betrayal that no one can win. Evil, malice and vanity are played out against the polished facade of civilized elegance. DANGEROUS LIAISONS tells the story of two sexual libertines, Valmont (Christopher Sugarman) and Merteuil (Becky Armor) who ruthlessly wield their power, wealth and influence to destroy other people's lives, all in the guise of love. To avenge herself against a lover who spurned her, Merteuil plots the corruption of his intended bride, the virginal Cécile (Amy Rose Capetta). She attempts to recruit Valmont, who refuses her, as he is much too distracted by Tourvel (Heather Huber-Brown), the devout and dedicated married woman whom he has marked for his own prey. Tourvel resists him, aided by Cécile's mother, Volanges (Julia Kapp). When, with the help of his aide, Azolan (Aaron Walker), Valmont learns that Volanges is thwarting his plans for Tourvel, he agrees with Merteuil to aid in Cécile's harm. Valmont uses another co-conspirator, the courtesan Émilie, in his pursuit of Tourvel, but manages to find himself falling in love with her. This arouses Merteuil's jealous rage, and she takes a lover, the young knight Danceny (Michael Olavson), to challenge him. When the master schemers finally turn on each other, all-out war ensues.

DANGEROUS LIAISONS originated as a late eighteenth century epistolary novel by Choderlos de Laclos. Christopher Hampton recreates the intense chemistry of the two aristocrats with a richly articulate stage adaptation. True to its reputation for innovative staging of current and provocative shows, Pisces Moon won't be setting DANGEROUS LIAISONS in France in the late 1700's. Instead, director Susan Myer Siltan has given DANGEROUS LIAISONS a highly stylized, futuristic look, like Dune and Gattaca



Preview from Santa Cruz [Good Times Weekly](#).

Doing 'Dangerous' Pisces Moon takes on revenge, redemption

by Christa Martin

Susan Myer always delves into "dangerous" territory. The plays she directs for Pisces Moon, the

READY FOR 'Liaisons' Heather Huber-Brown stars in a Pisces Moon version of "Dangerous Liaisons."

local theater company she runs

with Christopher Sugarman, are never blasé. Instead, Myer time and time again punches her audience with hard-hitting themes, powerhouse acting, and shows that usually have a controversial thread woven through them. That's what makes her a "dangerous" director: She constantly takes risks. She'll do it again with "Dangerous Liaisons," which plays at the Actors' Theatre April 22 through May 21.

While "Dangerous Liaisons" holds more familiarity than some Pisces Moon productions, Myer takes the show to a new level: the future. This French story about lust and betrayal will get a makeover and be transported into a Gattaca-type era.

The story is a familiar one, having been seen in the 1988 film of the same name, which starred Michelle Pfeiffer and John Malkovich, then again in an adapted version with 1999's Cruel Intentions, starring Reese Witherspoon and now-hubby Ryan Phillippe. But Myer believes that audiences aren't bored with hearing the tale.

"Apparently, we are not tired of the subject yet," she says. "In fact, I think we get a kind of grim satisfaction from seeing the pillars of our society get pulled down by their excesses, particularly the carnal ones."

She's talking about the downright decadent behavior of the characters in "Dangerous Liaisons." While the players onstage may indulge in all things "dangerous," Myer doesn't want anyone to walk away from the play thinking their conduct is acceptable.

"I don't want people to come out enjoying any of the decadence of these people, but to come out saying that the result of this type of depravity is destruction."

This depravity comes in the dealings of the two main characters, Merteuil (Becky Armor) and Valmont (Sugarman). Merteuil was burned by a lover, who now wants to marry a chaste, young virgin. She asks her friend, Valmont, to seduce this young girl to make a laughing stock of Merteuil's ex. Betrayal, jealousy and lust unfold. Morally, everything goes downhill. In the end, these heartless people's own hearts do them in. "It's a reflection of corruption, of exploitation in society," Myer says. "Of our lack of compassion—all completely parallel with what's going on in our world right now."

The play is full of layers, of messages, of themes. Like many of Myer's former productions, this one will likely find the audience contemplating the production long after they exit the theater.

"This play is about love and revenge," says Becky Armor, who plays the conniving Merteuil. "[My character] is like a study in self-control. She exploits other characters, pushes and prods at their weaknesses. She's great at manipulating other people, but not so sure about manipulating her own heart."

This is Armor's sixth production with Pisces Moon, a company whose style she favors and whose director (Myer) she admires and credits with honing her craft. It had been a long vacation for Armor when she connected with Pisces Moon a few years ago. As a child she had played onstage and had dreams of studying film and television at UCLA, but ended up majoring in English instead at the popular university down south. Upon returning to Santa Cruz the Harbor High English teacher found a newspaper ad mentioning auditions for the company. She tried out, and the rest is, as they say, history. Armor pontificates about why people should come see "Dangerous Liaisons."

"It's not every day you get a chance to watch the glory of the English language in all of its classy little bits and pieces," she says. "It has that grandiose verbosity, that bombastic speech, almost over the top."

It's almost over the top, but not quite. That's the way Myer keeps it. Always treading on that dangerous line.

"Dangerous Liaisons" runs April 22 to May 21 at the Actors' Theatre, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. Shows play at 8 p.m. on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays; 3 p.m. Sundays May 8 and 15. Tickets are \$15/general, \$12/students with ID and seniors; two-for-one tickets on Thursdays. Tickets can be purchased at the Santa Cruz Civic Box Office, 307

Church St., or 420-5260. For more information, call 425-1003 or visit www.piscesmoon.org.

"PLAN ON SEEING DANGEROUS LIASIONS. Pisces Moon Productions who have produced some of Santa Cruz's finest theatre hours, is doing Dangerous Liaisons . . . They've set it in a Dune/Gattaca time and space. The original story took place in France in the late 18th century." - Bruce Bratton, BrattonOnline.com

CAST

Becky Armor: Merteuil
Amy Rose Capetta: Cécile
Linda Dunham: Majordomo
Heather Huber-Brown: Tourvel
Helene Simkin Jara: Rosemonde
Julia Kapp: Volanges
Michael Olavson: Danceney
Christopher Sugarman: Valmont
Katie Vroom: Émilie
Aaron Walker: Azolan
Flynn Witmeyer: Troy/Azolan Understudy



CREW

Susan Myer Silton: Director and Co-Producer
Andy Botsford: Production Manager
Margaux Hodges: Stage Manager
Roger McCune: Set Design
Django Hulphers: Light Design
Kathryn Hart: Costume Design
Randall Birch: Sound Design
Joseph Leindecker: Graphic Artist
Gary Young: Associate Set Designer
Mark Shuler, Fight Choreographer
Laura Dannehl: Props
Alex Steinhaus: Choreographer
Katie Vroom: Singing Coach

This production is sponsored in part by the Cultural Council of Santa Cruz County.



