

February 10, 2000

Back Stage West



THE LIAR

at the Secret Rose Theatre



Reviewed by Madeleine Shaner

The *Liar*, a seminal comedy by default, was written in 1619 by Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, who was born in Mexico City but spent most of his life in Spain, where he was deemed "El Indiano," or the American. Determined to obtain a court appointment, he was considered a poet dilettante, despite the 24 plays he produced in the 10 years of his office-seeking, and despite the fact that *The Liar*, or *La Verdad Sospechosa* (*The Truth Suspected*), was a major influence on the "comedy of character" plays of later writers such as Molière.

Dakin Matthews has succeeded in producing a masterful translation of the play into contemporary English, retaining the flavor of the Spanish Golden Age, the lively rhythm and rhyme of the verse, and the high humor of 17th-century commedia. The Artaeus Company, a troupe of ultimate professionals, brings the pages to life in a delightfully stageworthy production.

Don Garcia, a young law student just returned home to Madrid from the University of Salamanca, has a number of redeeming features—he's handsome, charming, educated, verbal, a highly eligible son for Don Beltrán, a wealthy nobleman—but he has an overly vivid imagination. In other words, he can't tell the truth. Don Beltrán fears for his son's future and quickly arranges a marriage that will keep him from mischief.

Meanwhile Don Garcia falls for the beautiful Jacinta, whom he's been misled into thinking is Lucrecia, her good friend Tied up in lies and charming deception aided and abetted by his servant, Tristán, he weaves a tangled web through the emotions of the two young women, his servant, his harried father, and Jacinta's

jealous swain, Don Juan de Sosa. The complications pile up, involving mistaken identities, misunderstanding, a logpile of lies, a duel, a few heartbreaks, and a final come-uppance for the "imaginative" Don Garcia.

The Liar is double cast, with a vigorous ensemble of talented players from this superb company. Among them, on opening night, John DeMita was sensational as the adorable liar—witty, cute, light on his feet—a master of the verbal swordplay and the highly physical shenanigans. (J.D. Cullum alternates.) Dakin Matthews (alternating with Phil Proctor) does an outstanding turn as Tristán, faithful and very funny servant, in on the deception and active in resolving it. Nike Doukas (alternating with Emily Chase) is exquisite as the perky Jacinta, whom Don Garcia thinks is Lucrecia. Alicia Wollerton has sweetness on her side as the overlooked real Lucrecia. (Julia Fletcher alternates.) Mikael Salazar (alternate Richard Miró) is sturdy as the feisty suitor of Lucrecia, backed up by his good and loyal friend, Don Félix (Jason Kuykendall alternating with J. Michael Flynn). Marcelo Tubert as Don Beltrán (alternate Bert Rosario), is nicely confused and conflicted by the behavior of his rascally son. Carl Smith (composer/performer) is the sidelined musician who tells the tale in song.

Directed by Anne McNaughton with the same dedication shown by the ensemble, with minimal, but effective, set and colorful costumes by Dean Cameron, lighting by John Grant, and fight direction by Michael Salazar, *The Liar* reaches a millennium zenith though it's only February. This is what theatre should be.

"The Liar," presented by the Artaeus Theatre at the Secret Rose Theatre, 11256 Magnolia Blvd., N. Hollywood. Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sat.-Sun. 2:30 p.m. Feb. 5 - Feb. 27. \$15-20. (818) 506-5436.