Molière’s Les Fourberies de Scapin - The Rascalities of Scapin - first presented in 1671, is rarely performed now. And that may be for good reason. Written as a response to competition in Paris from Italian Commedia dell’Arte groups, it is a loosely plotted vehicle for a scallywag central character and his dim-witted masters. The elements are familiar - thwarted lovers, heartless parents, wily servants - in predicaments which are implausible and occasions for varying amounts of buffoonery.

In this end of season co-production from State Theatre and the Queensland Theatre Company, director Scott Witt has adapted Moliere and framed the play with speculations on the nature of comedy as Scapin, impulsively breaking into speeches from Hamlet, yearns for the dignified cadences of tragedy. It is a gently comic, if not hugely imaginative idea - and provides fruitful opportunities for the inventive and, again, excellent Paul Blackwell as Scapin - but it doesn’t mask the fact that the rest of the plot doesn’t bear too much scrutiny.

That’s fine too. Commedia is the art of making much of flimsy elements, those skits and improvised pieces known as lazzi. But here, with only the very occasional topical reference, there is not enough to anchor Scapin against mere whimsicality. Dean Hills has created a delightful tenement set, inspired by Buster Keaton and perhaps the decor of Chuck Jones. But his costumes, zany and asymmetrical with mad checks and half mast trousers, are visually overwhelming. With topiary hair and Split Enz make-up, the actors are confined creatively by the sheer impact of the design.

Some manage to get through. Caroline Mignone scores as the gypsy Zerbine, as does Justin Moore as the gormless Leandre and Annie Lee as Carlos, missing cues and fluffing lines. Michael Habib is outstanding in both his timing and comic presence as the pompous Geronte, and the scene,
where Blackwell’s Scapin entices him into a large sack in order to cudgel him, is a highpoint.

There are plenty of other amusements in here but, at two hours, the show needs some sharp edits. There are flat spots and, with Adam Couper’s insistent sound and music effects, sometimes a sense of desperation to get laughs. With the talent gathered here that is no problem. But the actors need room to move, and the play, however foolish, to unfold with less fussiness and self-consciousness.