

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in - The Australian

Moliere's Scapin

adapted by Scott Witt

State Theatre Company of South Australia
with Queensland Theatre Company
Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre
until 15 November. Bookings at Bass 131 246
Tickets \$ 16.50 - \$ 42

Brisbane season Optus Playhouse, Queensland Performing Arts Centre
24 November - 13 December. Bookings QTIIX 136 246

Moliere'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 Zerbinett, 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.