It is said that Moliere wrote The Rascalities of Scapin to beat the competition. The Italian Commedia dell'Arte troupes were all the rage in Paris in the 1670s and the famous French playwright was looking to win back support for his own theatre. He had borrowed heavily from Commedia in many of his plays, dispensing with masks but keeping much of the formula. But with Scapin he went even closer. Scapin is very like the Commedia stock character Arlecchino and his pranks are the familiar ones that come with having to deal with boorish fathers, dopey lovers and mischievous rivals.

Director Scott Witt, in this joint production for State Theatre and QTC, has freely adapted the original and given the Scapin actor ideas above his station. He longs for the seriousness of tragedy and much of the text parodies Hamlet, as the frustrated player endlessly tries to subvert the performance with the histrionics of high art. It is an amusing idea - in fact, a theme common to Daffy Duck - but it is not enough to sustain two hours on the main stage and that is where this production has its difficulties.

Commedia is a lively form and continues to provide actors with the chance to develop skills in physicality and improvisation. But its value is more in the workshop than in stage productions - especially as the flimsy story lines and situations of the classic form now seem tired and overwrought.

Everything has been done to give this production pizzazz - which in itself suggests a degree of uncertainty about its intrinsic humour. Designer Dean Hills has created an appealing decor. The two apartment houses at centre stage could be the work of Fritz Freleng and the cartoon look works well. However, the costumes, clownish makeup and outlandish wigs - reminiscent of Split Enz at their most bizarre - are visually overpowering much of the time and the actors, on whom the real task of the comedy rests, lose a sense of spontaneity.
There are some excellent performances nonetheless. Paul Blackwell, as Scapin, shows, yet again, that he is among the very best comic actors in the country. His Scapin is ironic and nicely underplayed and he does his wry best with the character’s vaulting ambition to play tragic. Also outstanding is Michael Habib as the blustering, self important Geronte. It is skilful comedy, amusingly phrased and complete with pratfalls. The scene where Blackwell’s Scapin persuades him into a sack in order to give him a cudgelling is an effortless display which contrasts with the forced performances (and, it must be said, the weaker comic opportunities) from Andy McDonell as Argante and Bryan Proberts as Octave.

Caroline Mignone is droll as Zerbinette and Justin Moore finds just enough substance in the gormless Leandre for us to be interested in his romantic fate. And here is the problem for Scapin - there is not enough to engage us. Whimsical comedy soon wears thin without complexity and context. A few of Blackwell’s quips about immigration give the play immediacy and the kind of topicality that is the spirit of Commedia - but these moments are short-lived and we are soon back to Witt’s overheated direction and Adam Couper’s intrusive music and sound effects. There are plenty of laughs in this production and it is warmly received on opening night. But there are too many flat spots and desperate remedies, and, running at least thirty minutes too long, Scapin tests not only our credulity, but our patience.