

Dal Theatre gambles with *The Rivals*

by **Maven Gates**

Dalhousie University's Department of Theatre has decided to gamble with their second production of the 1982 Fall season. Richard Brinsley Sheridan's Georgian burlesque *The Rivals* is not a dish suited to please a broad range of palates; particularly when those involved in its preparation seemed to strive toward different goals.

Robert Doyle designed truly magnificent period costumes which, in all fairness, stole the show. Each actor bore a panoply, garnished with artistic detail and suitably topped with one of Bonnie Deakin's superb wigs. These sartorial masterpieces charged the production with bona fine Georgian English savour.

Peter Perina's modernistic white plastic set, resembling a monstrous abstract corsetted gown, framed the stage with an odd contrastive incongruence to the realism of the toggery.

Although lacking any attempt to portray historical authenticity, the set was cleverly practical. Frugal interiors, effectively composed of a refined sample of choice props, could be whisked in and out from in front of the amorphous background in the blink of an eye.

With the necessity of halting after every scene ingeniously eliminated, director David Brown was able to keep the action brisk and smooth; an advantage to the enjoyment of a piece overly long by modern standards. Many of the social conventions that Sheridan sought to mock are no longer relevant. How many contemporary Canadians are married off to strangers in some sort of property deal arranged by their parents? Of course the proverbial generation gap appears never to be out of vogue and *The Rivals* has the younger set's romantic indifference to the senior set's feelings about financial reality at its core.

The plot is complex. Captain Jack Absolute has adopted the alias Ensign Beverly and feigned poverty in order to woo Lydia Languish. Miss Languish acquired her fascination with destitution from the romantic novels she devours by the bushel and is determined to lose two-thirds of her inheritance by marrying without her aunt's approval. Scheming propels confusion into mayhem when Sir Anthony, Jack's father, arranges the same match with Lydia's aunt, Mrs. Malaprop, unintentionally threatening to blow Jack's carefully planned caper. Complicate this with two other suitors who think, at least, that they are vying for Lyda's affections, a bevy of plotting servants, a neurotic lover who fears his intended is merely acting out of gratitude, and more mistaken identities that you can shake a schtick at.

Surprisingly, the plot is incidental and it's on the characterization that Sheridan concentrated. In *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, Thomas Moore observed that in *The Rivals* Sheridan "overcharged most of his persons with

whims and absurdities, for which the circumstances they are engaged in afford but a very disproportionate vent." Only Jack and Julia are not saddled with a defining idiosyncrasy.

For effect, each of the principals shares a major scene with their respective antithesis; the practical Jack with the romantic Lydia; the precise Sir Anthony with the originator of the malapropism, Mrs. Malaprop; the cool, deadly Sir Lucius O'Trigger with the cowardly Bob Acres; and the sensible Julia with the oftentimes hysterical Faulkland. Whether the play works or not depends upon how successfully the actors are with their portrayals.

Here is where the diversity in intention became most apparent. One group of actors decided to remain traditional. Paulina Gillis, Glenn C.J. White, and Bill MacRae presented standout performances which were true to the original spirit of Restoration comedy.

Ms. Gillis captured the essence of the ingénue Lydia delectably. Her twittery delivery was as delicately masterful as her appearance. Sir Anthony received energetic animation from Mr. White complete with Mr. Whoopy laugh. Equally energetic and full of comic emotional lability, Mr. MacRae gave us a first-class Faulkland.

Another group favoured camp and were not quite as successful. Shanna Kelly had the juicy role of Mrs. Malaprop. At the cost of clarity, essential to the full appreciation of her foibles of vocabulary, Ms. Kelly concentrated on maintaining a constant pout with puffed up cheeks; delivering her lines à la Alfred Hitchcock.



Although miscast as Captain Jack, Michael Howell made the best of his performance. A member of the gentry should have refined diction. Mr. Howell pronounced one too many "th" as a "d" to be convincing as an aristocrat.

Paul D. Smith's portrayal of

Acres was marred by a distracting make-up job. His Emmett Kelly eyes were just too disturbing.

Ken Roy seemed either unhappy or uncomfortable in his role as Sir Lucius. This malaise translated into an insincere and at times unconvincing delivery.

I suppose there was something for everyone in *The Rivals* but achieving this variety with the risk of losing a confident, cohesive performance was a gamble.

The Theatre Department's next production is *The Sea* by Edward Bond which will open February 16.

For those who missed delightful message ...

by **Kenneth Newman**

You're never certain what a new John Cale album will sound like.

John Cale's records range from great (Paris 1919) to mundane (Vintage Violence) to dreadful (Church of Anthrax). Music for a New Society isn't great but I think, though I'm not sure yet, it's very good. It's rather impenetrable and perhaps that's the way Cale

intended it. The record is different for Cale; it's not what you'd expect to follow his last lp, *Honi Soit*. This is a dense, melancholy and beautiful record.

Cale's production manages to make the mix sound thick with only a few, usually simple, tracks on each song. The heavy use of reverberation and echo give this record the feel of being remem-

bered rather than heard. Cale has given particular attention to sounds and dynamics to embellish the predominant piano and twelve-string acoustic guitar and their "feel".

It's not clear why this is titled Music for a New Society — one tune, "Damn Life", is set to the tune of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" from his ninth symphony. Musically, I don't think this record

would offend even the most narrow-minded old Bob Dylan fan (as long as they didn't listen too closely). This is not to say it won't please the die-hard Velvet Underground or John Cale fan, as it will. But for the most part the songs are quiet and well-sung, aside from the one rocker (a very good one at that) and a curious poem spoken over a digitally delayed Romy-Korsakov symphony.

Some records are made to fit certain moods, occupations, activities and environments. The perfect setting for listening to this one is as follows: You're in a large but sparsely furnished loft which ideally doubles as a studio. You're an artist or an art student. You are in or from New York. You're sitting on a hard wooden floor drinking brandy.

You're with a person to whom you have absolutely nothing to say. You have a large and expensive stereo but you're not playing the record very loudly. It's three thirty in the morning.

