



Staten Island Advance

Sunday, Nov. 26, 2012

Moliere's 'Misanthrope' gets a rewrite for more laughs at Staten Island's Wagner College

by MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA

STATEN ISLAND, NY — “Chicks like my build. The way my shoulders pop.

I'm like a wedge, with just a pea on top.

You know that I'm a lawyer. You know it ain't so hard.

You wanna get divorced babe. Here's my card.”

How different is “The School for Lies,” playwright David Ives' adaptation of Moliere's “The Misanthrope,” from the 17th-century French masterwork?

The quatrain above pretty much exemplifies it.

And yet, as different as it sounds, it looks the same. Despite the 21st Century jabber, the cast is all in 1660s splendor — corsets and lace, waistcoats, pumps and white silk hose.

“The School for Lies,” which made its off-Broadway debut just last season in a praised-to-the-sky Classic Stage Company production starring Mamie Gummer, opens Tuesday in a short but lavishly appointed run in Stage One.

Stage One is the 100-seat black box performance space that the Wagner College Theater reserves for edgy, mostly non-musical productions (as opposed to the Main Stage, where commercial fare rules.)

The austere black box concept has been banished for the time being, however, with bright colors and a sunny lighting scheme, according to director Michael Tennenbaum, who says he is greatly enjoying the project. This is not always the case. Directors regularly accept projects that begin promisingly but turn torturous.

“The thing about the Ives play,” he said during a rehearsal, “is that it makes exactly the same comments about our society that Moliere was making in 1666: That society is hypocritical, two-faced, superficial, insincere and obsessed with the exterior of things.”

“The School for Lies” appropriates Moliere's characters, often with the same names, and puts them into comparable situations, but the outcomes are different. It's written in rhyming couplets, like the original, but has a far more in-your-face sense of humor.

The misanthrope of the original play, “Alceste,” is named simply “Frank” in the Ives version. And frank he is. Everyone gets tired of his relentless honesty. He's human nevertheless.

He finds himself drawn to the beautiful Celemine, a widow with many suitors.

In this version, Frank is only as appealing as his pedigree. She thinks he's the king's brother, which he is not. An odd courtship begins, but the truth will out.

Unlike “Misanthrope,” the exceptionally naughty “School for Lies” (the title is a reference to society) distributes happy, or just happyish, endings.

The student cast features Alex Boniello, Jonathan Goodman, Matthew Hosmer, Julia Jones, Caitlin Beckman and Olivia Puckett.