

The Beautiful People

The School for Scandal *update* doesn't quite pass

Phoenix Theatre's production of Richard B. Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* matches the 18th century English comedy eerily well: both are relatively entertaining, but without much substance.

The story is basically several high society types sitting around and gossiping about who-ever isn't in the room. There's the middle-aged Peter Teazle and his new young bride Mrs. Teazle, a country girl who has taken a liking to fashion and scandals. Mrs. Sneerwell and Joseph Surface are helping each other woo their objects of interests through rumours and deceit. Virtuous Maria is being chased after by pretty much everyone . . . etcetera, etcetera.

It's hard to sell a story like this, with far too little action and far too many names and subplots to keep track of—especially when you take into account the older style of English the characters speak. To make it work, you need to grab your audience right from the start and bring them into the world and the language. Unfortunately, the very first scene does exactly the opposite. Rielle Braid's Mrs. Sneerwell and Taylor Lewis's Snake sound more like they're reciting verses to each other than actually having a conversation. This distances the audience right off the bat, and makes it much more difficult to get into the story. Which is too bad, as the one thing *Scandal* has going for it is very fast-moving, witty dialogue, and most of the other performers handle Sheridan's words gracefully. In particular, Marina Lagace (Mrs. Candour) and Brian Culp (Joseph Surface) are able to rattle off their clever lines with energy and humour, but it just doesn't feel real.

Director Fran Gebhard tries to give the drawing room story

more modern significance by setting it in modern day L.A.—an interesting concept given our society's obsession with reality TV and celebrity gossip. But it ends up doing the story more harm than good. For, like any old English comedy, the good are vindicated and the wicked are exposed and disgraced, which isn't true of Hollywood by any stretch of the imagination. And there are some sexist undertones that ring false in a modern setting. For example, Mrs. Teazle ends up repenting her lavish ways to



Sylvia Sneerwell (Far left: Rielle Braid), Mrs. Crabtree (Sarah Cody), Benjamin Backbite (David Perry) and Mrs. Candor (Marina Lagace) gather for martinis and gossip

become a good wife, whereas a similar male character, Charles Surface, is found to be love-able and good in spite of his extravagant nature.

These kinds of comedies run the risk of being exceedingly boring, and that was one trap *Scandal* managed to avoid nicely. From the background dancers to the main characters, everyone has a great energy and keeps the story moving at a good pace. It's like a romantic comedy: if you ignore the questionable plot and just sit back and watch the pretty people you'll probably have a good time.

—Sarah Gignac

The School for Scandal

To March 22

Phoenix Theatre, UVic

Tickets \$10-\$20 • 721-8000