

# Otterbein skirts danger with successful opening 'Liaisons'

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, which opened last night at Otterbein Summer Theatre, is one of the best plays of the past decade. It's also one of the most challenging.

Sly wit, flirtatious charm and ironic sophistication fill the top level of British playwright Christopher Hampton's smooth adaptation of Choderlos de Laclos' 18th-century novel of letters about deceptive aristocrats. On a deeper level, Hampton addresses the bankruptcy of French society with intelligence and poignant tragedy.

Given a last-minute cast replacement in a pivotal role, Otterbein's 31st-season opener is surprisingly competent. The staging and many line readings are solid. Yet, director Dennis Romer and a promising 13-member cast so far have focused primarily on the first level.

Although the production brims with humor — especially in the 90-minute first act, which often conveys the jaundiced pleasures of a lusty bedroom farce — the second act should achieve more emotional power and expand more into a broader social resonance.

Surprisingly, Vincent O'Neill, who replaced Tim Gregory as Valmont last week, isn't the weak link. O'Neill, artistic director of the Irish Classical Theatre Company in Buffalo, New York, played Valmont just over a year ago at his theater; it seems like last week.

O'Neill is the legitimate star of this generally respectable production. His Valmont is funny and sad, unreliable in his deceptions but ultimately sympathetic. Only his second-act death scene, after a duel with a rival (Shad Swinehart's too-boyish La Chevalier Danceny), achieves the profound tragedy implicit in Hampton's vision of love submerged, denied and all but destroyed in a world of game-playing.

As the Marquise de Merteuil, Valmont's co-conspirator, former lover and ultimate enemy, guest actress Karen Radcliffe projects beauty, style, intelligence and wit. Yet, she seems too nice to be playing such malicious games. One yearns for a few revelatory glimpses of her evil delight in destroying others, but Radcliffe rarely exposes anything beyond her polite surfaces — except for a sob/scream when Valmont is fatally pierced.

## THEATER REVIEW

*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Otterbein Summer Theatre's student production of Christopher Hampton's drama. Directed by Dennis Romer.

Marquise de Merteuil.....	Karen Radcliffe
Vicomte de Valmont .....	Vincent O'Neill
Mme de Volanges.....	Marianne Timmons
Cecile Volanges.....	Kelly Reeves
Azolan.....	Adam Donmoyer

**All's unfair in love and war**

**Being presented** at 8 tonight and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — through July 13 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

**Tickets cost** \$14-\$16. Call 823-1109.

Guest actress Linda Dorff plays Mme de Rosemonde, Valmont's aunt, with a humorous blend of oblivious sentimentality and acuteness. Dorff's Rosemonde may be blind to Valmont's flaws, but she has a surprising ability to see through the social niceties.

Amy Ellenberger plays Valmont's reluctant lover and primary victim with technical competence, but her change of heart seemed mysterious last night, her repeated sobbing, strangely unemotional. Ellenberger resembles Michelle Pfeiffer, who played the same role on film with more convincing passion.

Otterbein has bowdlerized Valmont's letter-writing scene on the "desk" of a bawdy courtesan. On Broadway, Alan Rickman played it with explicit lustiness and hilarious *double entendres*; O'Neill is forced to sacrifice most of the punch lines in deference to a Westerville audience's perceived conservatism.

If Otterbein is going to try such an accomplished and ambitious play, why not trust the intelligence of the script and its audience?

Overall, Otterbein's production follows the letter — and letters — of Hampton's script but needs more rehearsal time to fully capture its ironic and tragic spirit.



## STAGE NOTES

# Otterbein offers crowd-pleasing 'Liaisons'

For the first time in years, Otterbein Summer Theatre has opened its season to standing ovations. Otterbein is only the second central Ohio troupe to stage *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, one of the best dramas of the past decade.

Christopher Hampton's witty, sexy portrait of decadent French aristocrats has so many levels and subtleties that it isn't easy to stage, but Otterbein did a surprisingly good job on opening night — especially after a sudden cast change.

Vincent O'Neill, who replaced Tim Gregory, plays the pivotal role of duplicitous Valmont with irony and passion. O'Neill teaches at the State University of New York at Buffalo, trained at Ireland's famous Abbey Theatre, where he was a company member for five years, and spent three years working with mime Marcel Marceau in France.

Last week's opening-night audience stood to applaud O'Neill and guest actress Karen Radcliffe (stylish and intelligent if not evil enough as Marquise de Merteuil).

In the review, I praised the production for its humor and for jelling so well under the circumstances, but noted missed opportunities for laughter because of underplaying of the sexual subtext.

In retrospect, one sentence was misleading: "Otterbein has bowdlerized Valmont's letter-writing scene on the 'desk' of a bawdy courtesan." To bowdlerize, according to the dictionary, is to "expurgate ... by omitting or modifying parts considered indelicate."

Artistic Director Dennis Romer, who staged Hampton's challenging work, defends his approach — and denies that any word was deleted.

"Nothing was omitted," Romer said. "We

experimented with several ways of doing (the letter-writing scene), but there is nothing in the script that instructs the actors or director to play it with explicit lustiness." Point taken.

*Les Liaisons Dangereuses* continues at 8 tonight and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — through July 13 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. For tickets, call 823-1109.

## A DAILY DREAM

Beginning Monday, the Poets Cafe at Living the Dream Theatre will open daily for "a full slate of cutting-edge programs."

On Fridays and Saturdays, the troupe will continue to present original theatrical productions. The enjoyable current show (through July 26) is *Hughes and Blues*, a poetry-and-song tribute to Langston Hughes.

The rest of the week will be packed with actors' workshops (Mondays), open-mike poetry and music (Tuesdays), music performances (Wednesdays), poetry (Thursdays) and artist workshops or special programs (Sundays).

"We're doing well with our Friday and Saturday shows, but we want to open up to new nights and new audiences," Artistic Director James Chapmyn said.

Most events will run from 7 to 10 p.m. in Dream's converted cabaret-style theater and adjoining art gallery at 44 S. Washington Ave. For more information, call 224-4930.

## CATCO CHANGES

As if a change of address wasn't enough for a busy summer, Contemporary American Theatre Company also is changing many staff positions.

CATCO, which finished moving its administrative and technical staff Monday and Tuesday into the Riffe Center, has added four full-time staff members during the past month: Kelly Smith, as box-office supervisor; Kim Ryan, as public relations/marketing associate; Amity

Cauthorn, as administrative assistant; and Jennifer Hawkins, as box-office assistant.

Seven more staff changes begin this month. P. Susan Sharrock, a company manager and publicity director at old Players Theatre for more than a decade, has joined CATCO in the newly created position of part-time house manager.

Keya Myers-Alkire is master electrician/audio engineer.

Rick Hole has added box-office manager to his continuing role as business manager. Justin Simons has shifted to part-time box-office assistant. Carrie Klein is a new technical apprentice.

As mentioned last week, former actress Janet Davis is now the production manager. Resident actor Michael Harper will leave Columbus in August.

## NADEL REMEMBERED

Columbus native Martha Smith Nadel is remembered for her support of theater and of her husband.

"She was a local girl who made good," said retired actress Patricia Gaines Ayer, a friend of the Nadels who still lives in Columbus.

Nadel, who died in May in Naples, Fla., at the age of 80, was the wife of Norman Nadel, the retired drama critic of *The New York World-Telegram and Sun* and a culture writer for Scripps-Howard newspapers. Nadel, who married his wife in 1941 after they attended Denison University, had been the movie, theater and music critic for the *Columbus Citizen* (later the *Citizen-Journal*) in the 1940s and 1950s.

During the past seven years, Mrs. Nadel served as a docent for the newly opened Philharmonic Center for the Arts in Naples.

In Columbus, Mrs. Nadel was a PTA president, served on the YWCA board and volunteered at Riverside Hospital and Maple Grove United Methodist Church.

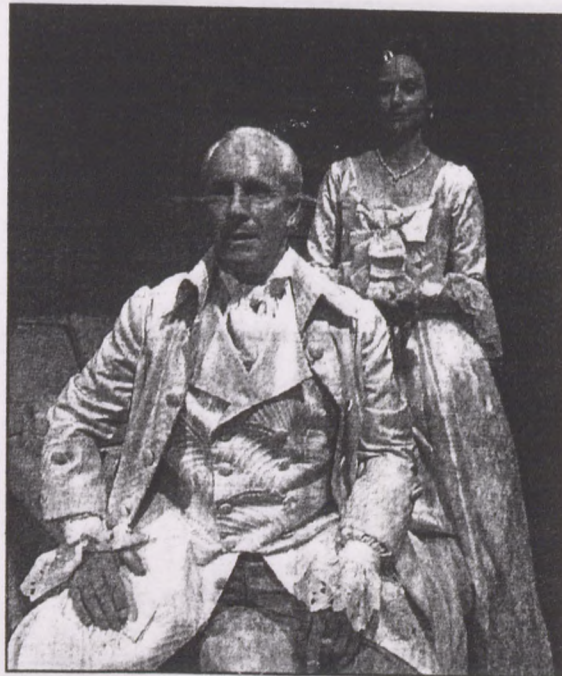
Michael Grossberg is Dispatch theater critic.



**MICHAEL  
GROSSBERG**



# Otterbein graduate makes her marquise in 'Les Liaisons Dangereuses'



Karen Radcliffe as the Marquise de Merteuil with Vincent O'Neill, as Valmont, in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*

By Michael Grossberg  
Dispatch Theater Critic

Two French aristocrats play games of seduction and deception in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, which opens Otterbein Summer Theatre's 31st season.

Their competition destroys innocent people — and, ultimately, themselves.

"It's a different kind of love story," Karen Radcliffe said. The 1980 Otterbein graduate, a television, film and stage actress, plays the Marquise de Merteuil opposite guest actor Vincent O'Neill's Valmont.

"Like everyone in the play, they wear masks — a public mask and a totally different mask when they are alone together. They start the game for pure enjoyment, but it ends up backfiring on them."

British playwright Christopher Hampton adapted the London and New York hit — an Olivier Award-winner for best play in England and a 1987 Tony nominee for best play — from Choderlos de Laclos' 18th-century novel of letters.

Radcliffe admires director Dennis Romer's design concept. "Everything is

"I'm still a leading-lady type, but I'm not a young ingenue anymore."

KAREN RADCLIFFE

cream or pale on a very simple stage filled with Louis XV furniture," she said.

"The neutral colors reflect the boredom or lack of color in these people's lives."

The Marquise's elegant smiles hide a vicious heart — and a probing, modern intelligence.

"This woman was ahead of her time," Radcliffe said. "She invented herself in the years before the French Revolution, when aristocrats would go to the opera or receive people into their home. She found a way to survive in a man's world."

"At first, you think there's nothing redeeming about her at all. She is a wicked

woman. But Hampton makes it possible to see her and Valmont as human beings.

"As we rehearse, it's exciting to find those few places where you can see what the Marquise and Valmont once were together. At one time, they were very much in love; in many ways, they still are."

Previously, Radcliffe returned as a guest Equity artist to play the lead roles in Otterbein Summer Theatre's *The Heidi Chronicles* (1992), *The Real Thing* (1987) and *Plenty* (1986), and in Players Theatre Columbus' *And a Nightingale Sang* ... in 1987.

She has appeared in films (*When the Bough Breaks*, *RoboCop*, *Innocent Prey*, *The Second Degree*, *Trinity* and *D.O.A.*) and television (*L.A. Law*, *The Trials of Rosie O'Neill*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Dallas*, *Dallas: The Early Years*, *Superior Court*, *Right To Kill* and *He's Not Your Son*).

Radcliffe is shifting to more mature roles. "I'm still a leading-lady type, but I'm not a young ingenue anymore. The industry, particularly in Hollywood, is getting younger and younger."

At the GeVa Theatre in Rochester,

N.Y., Radcliffe recently performed a staged reading of *The One-Eyed Man Is King*, Otterbein grad Carter Lewis' new play about a blind thief who intrudes in an alcoholic woman's house.

"The part was written for me," Radcliffe said, adding that she will do a Los Angeles reading of the revised script this fall.

Between acting stints, Radcliffe, who lives in Pasadena, Calif., works as director of development for a religious foundation.

"Nobody was more surprised than me to realize that I had producing, directing and computer skills that could be used in creative ways in and outside the acting business."

"One skill feeds the other, but acting is still my greatest love."

■ Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. next Sunday — through July 13 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$14-\$16. Call 823-1109.