

From DallasVoice.com

Stage

Manic La Mancha

By Arnold Wayne Jones Staff Writer

Dec 18, 2008 - 11:21:00 AM

## Cast turns farce ‘Trysts’ into cross-dressing gold; ‘Closer’ hits the mark

From Moliere to Shakespeare, “classics” can be burdensome. After all, 17th century plays may have been popular — even state-of-the-art — when men wore leggings and carried swords, but in the world of “Spring Awakening” and Edward Albee, we might expect something more ... relevant.

Which means adapting a farce by a Mexican nun born in 1651 is tricky business. Dialogue can sound stilted, the complex plotting can be labyrinthine, characters can seem more caricatures. And at the bumpy start of “Trysts in Toledo,” now on stage at Theatre Three, that seems to be the case.

But once the play gets moving — when the snowball effect of coincidences and mistaken identities provide their own momentum, logic be damned — “Trysts” rockets along like a locomotive on a downhill slope.

It takes a while to get there. Cleaving too closely to its source material, the oblique exposition creates confusion where it should provide a simple roadmap for the characters (“the man for whom I am currently smitten” is too-roundabout a way of saying, “Don Carlos”). Despite some proto-feminist concepts of the female intellect and patriarchal rules of womanhood, it doesn’t get the laughs it needs.

But when Gregory Lush finally enters midway (or what feels like midway) through Act 1, everything begins to turn. Any sex farce, especially a period costume extravaganza like this one, depends primarily on actors who “get” the tone a farce demands, and Lush does. His performance is strange, idiosyncratic, goofy — rolling his eyes and his Rs with equal abandon, little winks to the audience that this is all meant to be fun.

With his comic energy to play off, others in the cast rise to the challenge, too. Ashley Wood, looking like he belongs in a deck of especially gay Hoyle playing cards, twitches with the bravado of Lord Flashheart from “Blackadder.”

As the wily maid Celia and her libidinous Romeo, Aleisha Force and Jeff Swearingen generate the best comedic chemistry. Swearingen steal the second act — hell, the whole show — in a brilliant bit that would normally be relegated to off-stage business: Pretending to be a woman, he changes costumes in plain sight, improvising jokes with the audience. The scene in which he woos Lush’s



SEX, PLEASE, WE’RE SPANISH: A new translation of ‘Trysts in Toledo’ provides a showcase for comic actors, especially Gregory Lush, right.

clueless suitor erases all gripes about the play's weaknesses. "Trysts in Toledo" might not look like your typical seasonal play, but it certainly leaves you feeling jolly.

Equally un-Christmasy is the main stage production at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, "Closer Than Ever." Choosing Rene Moreno, who doesn't direct many musicals, to take on a revue — songs without plot — seemed like a peculiar selection, but it turned out to be a wise one.

With a sparse set and only four actors dressed in black, Moreno has crafted a likeable chamber piece from an unlikely source: the music of Richard Maltby Jr. and David Shire, a composing duo hardly known for their inimitable style of popular successes — that is, they aren't Sondheim... or even Webber.

But they can write amusing ditties about love — including unrequited love by one man for his straight friend — sung by a cast ideally suited for this kind of catchy, light music: Paul Taylor, Megan Kelly Bates, Cameron McElyea and Mary Gilbreath. They each shine in the course of this effervescent two hours.

"Trysts in Toledo," Theatre Three, 2900 Routh St. Through Jan. 18. Thursdays and Sundays at 7:30 p.m., weekend matinees at 2:30 p.m. \$10–\$40. 214-871-3300.

"Closer Than Ever," Greenville Center for the Arts, 5601 Sears St. Through Dec. 31. Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays–Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. \$22–\$32. 214-828-0094.

---

## 'ZERO' LOOKING FOR N.Y. AUDIENCE

A few years ago, I became the first critic to review a small one-man show called "Zero" from Dallas-based writer-producer-actor Danny O'Connor, pictured. It turned out to be a real charmer about how men relate to each other. Even though there was nothing especially gay about it, it made my top 10 list for the year. Ever since, O'Connor has treated me as the play's unofficial godfather — the champion when no one else was listening — and has updated me on its status.



"Zero" recently opened in New York City (not Broadway) for a seven week run, and like a lot of plays — no fewer than five major musicals are shuttering in January due to the tight economy — it needs an audience.

If you find yourself in the Big Apple over the holidays, be sure to stop into the Roy Arias Theatre at Ninth Avenue and 44th Street (nightly except Wednesdays and Sundays) for a delightfully quirky one-man comedy. And give Danny a Texas-sized "howdy."

— A.W.J.

*This article appeared in the Dallas Voice print edition December 19, 2008.*

© Copyright by DallasVoice.com

