

The School for Scandal

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Eric Davis's Snake gets physical with Jennifer Clement's Lady Sneerwell in School for Scandal, a randy new treat on an unusually strong theatre roster.

By Richard Brinsley Sheridan. An Arts Club Theatre Company production. At the Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage until November 26

It starts with hot sex and fantastic clothes. It couldn't really get much better, but this Arts Club production maintains an unstoppable level of artistry. It's the first must-see show of the abundant fall season.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan's 1777 masterpiece *The School for Scandal* was a revival of the 1600s' Restoration style of comedy. Basically, it's a sophisticated farce about sex and manners—about appearances.

And, man, does this Arts Club production get the appearances right. Ted Roberts's stunning set is a skewed collection of huge, gilded picture frames. Rebekka Sorensen's costumes are glorious. Just wait till you see Lady Sneerwell clothe herself in her ruby-and-cream-striped underskirt and delicately floral brocade skirt after humping the handsome Snake. Brace yourself for Joseph Surface's fawn-coloured frock coat with its accents of pink Chinese satin. Sorensen plays colour and texture the way Mozart combines notes.

The plot is ridiculously complicated; that's part of the fun. Incognito, Sir Oliver Surface tests the character of his two nephews to see which will inherit his fortune; Charles is a generous libertine and Joseph is a penny-pinching hypocrite. In an overlapping story line, Joseph attempts to seduce Lady Teazle, the young wife of the 50-something Sir Peter Teazle. Lady Sneerwell masterminds a third level of intrigue in which she tries to get her hooks into the handsome Charles.

Most of the performances are fantastic. Jennifer Clement could not be more dangerously beautiful as Lady Sneerwell, and Scott Bellis serves a banquet of laughs as the increasingly desperate Joseph. David Marr makes Lord Teazle's marital agony downright boisterous and Mia K. Ingimundson deftly negotiates Lady Teazle's transformation from giddy youngster to mature woman. Christopher Gaze is hilarious as both Mr. Crabtree (a fop) and Humphreys, a servant Gaze plays as virtually comatose.

We've got director Dean Paul Gibson to thank for the extravagant sense of fun that permeates this mounting. Snake doesn't athletically screw Sneerwell in Sheridan's text and she doesn't twist his ear to get his attention while he's doing it. Both of those things happen here. Bravo.