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Lantern's puppet treatment puts a wild spin on Moliere

By Toby Zinman

For The Inquirer

Conventional wisdom has it that in the 17th century, Moliere raised French comedy for the first time to the level of French tragedy. Forget conventional wisdom. This contemporary version of Moliere's classic, *Scapin*, is the Lantern Theater's hilarious holiday frolic; it was adapted by Mark O'Donnell and the great clown Bill Irwin, and then Aaron Cromie, our town's brilliant puppetmeister, tweaked their adaptation further. The result is irresistible.

The usual suspects are rounded up as they always are in Moliere comedy. There are geezers (two for preference) who are mean, stingy, and dictatorial. Their two sons, who are lamebrained, are in love with the wrong girls, in this case a blond bimbo and a wild gypsy. There are various mistreated servants.

All of these characters are played by puppets or partial puppets. Some have human heads and puppet arms, while some have puppet heads and human hands, and some are altogether little puppets. Dave Johnson, Leah Walton, Bradley K. Wrenn, and Matthew Wright provide all the faces, hands and voices.

And then there is, as there always is, the wily, clever servant who outsmarts the geezers, rescues the young lovers, and generally saves the day. Ben Lloyd at his agile, ironical best, is Scapin. He snarls, he sneers, he flirts, he speaks in a French accent and in a Castillian lilt. This is a tour de force performance, reined in just short of show-stealing.

Scapin has the usual overcomplicated plot involving shipwrecks, mistaken identities, changed names, unbelievable coincidences, and chase scenes. There is a puppet policeman in a puppet gondola who zooms by occasionally. When the gondola backs up, it beeps.

Our suspension of disbelief that makes us believe in the human reality of puppets is one of the show's many pleasures, enhanced by the charming set (designed by Nick Embree) creating a Venice made of crooked, crenellated cutouts. The costumes - for people and puppets - designed by Mary Folino are wackily detailed.

Cromie directed the show (in addition to creating the puppets) and has built in all kinds of self-

referential jokes about the audience, about acting, and about how much fun it is to put on a show. And not only that, the Lantern has, finally, comfy new chairs!

Scapin

Presented by Lantern Theater Company at St. Stephen's Theater, 10th and Ludlow Streets, through Jan. 3. Tickets: \$20-\$35. Information: 215-829-0395 or www.lanterntheater.org.

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