

## Review: Bad boys, lusty ladies sizzle in 'Women Beware Women'

By CHRIS SILK

Friday, February 5, 2010

FORT MYERS — Rudyard Kipling wrote that "the female of the species must be deadlier than the male." One suspects that he had just finished a viewing of Thomas Middleton's "Women Beware Women" before scribbling that. Strap on your petticoats, lace up your corsets and button your shoes - this is the 17th-century version of "Girls Gone Wild."

Middleton's "Women" is a Jacobean tragedy, meaning that people - a lot of people - die. Based partly on actual events, the play examines the intertwined lives and illicit loves of a group of Italian gentry. There really was a Bianca Cappello (played with poisonous sweetness by Ashley Graziano), first the mistress then the consort of Francesco de' Medici. She jumps beds like a child skipping squares in hopscotch - and she's far from the worst in the play.

The show clocks in a few minutes shy of three hours; think of it as a "Jerry Springer" marathon. You're parked on the couch, plowing through a bag of chips, a pint of fudge ripple in the freezer and watching an uncle and a niece wrapped in incest while the audience gasps in horror. Up next? An episode titled "I Had the Husband Killed on Monday and Married the Widow on Tuesday!" The next hour brings "Older Women and the Young Men Who Love Them."

The sex wars of "Women" are fought against the background of the Catholic morality that pervades the era. In a broader sense, it is a lecture against sin and a sermon on the virtues of the Church, its guidance and strict rules.

As with Shakespeare, "Women Beware Women" makes it easy to get lost in the rhythm of the words. While not quite Bard quality, listen for some gorgeous poetry throughout - particularly from Nykkie Ptaszek (Isabella) - as she denounces having to marry a fool of a husband. No droning Sunday sermon this, the entire ensemble moves well, comes toward the audience for their monologues and projects across the soaring emptiness of the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center space.

Veteran performers Joann Haley (Livia) and Louise Wigglesworth (The Widow) spar in word and deed over a chess game in one of the play's most fascinating scenes. The ebb and flow of action on the board mirrors the violent comings and goings around them; although their talk reflects pleasantries, the game becomes an obvious metaphor

for life, with players attacking, setting cunning traps, brave knights dying and queens conquering. Cash Decuir, as the cuckolded Leantio, brings fire and vigor to his monologues - and a dewey-eyed softness to scenes with his new bride.

Three directors are credited - Annette Trossbach, Wigglesworth and Michael Dunsworth; whoever developed the gambit that has the cast licking, groping, stroking, cupping, fluffing and touching anything and everything that can possibly be sexualized deserves credit for injecting a kinky, kinky humor into several spots. Dunsworth and John Saco (Fabritio) do things to coin purses and walking sticks that would send the Catholic church running for Inquisitors.

Props are minimal - only a few chairs and tables - which are carted on and off the stage by servants in a choreographed dance. Steve Pawlowski's original music gets a little lost in the show - noticeable only in the fight scene, where it punctuates the rattle and clash of blades. Despite the obvious work that went into sewing costumes for 17 people, modern dress might have been better than trying to reproduce the opulence of medieval Florence on a shoestring budget.

*"Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!" Email me, [csilk@naplesnews.com](mailto:csilk@naplesnews.com), find me on Twitter at [@napleschris](https://twitter.com/napleschris) or read my [Stage Door theater blog](#).*



© 2010 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online