

Stage Buzz

What's New in New York City Theatre

Review - Scapin (Turtle Shell Productions)

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Stage Buzz Review by Byrne Harrison

From the moment the audience steps into the Turtle's Shell Theater, director Shawn Rozsa plunges them into the neon-bright world of Itty Bitty Italy, the village that serves as the setting for Scott McCrea's new translation of Molière's *Scapin*. There are vibrant colors everywhere; it is, after all, the feast of San Piccolo, the patron saint of Itty Bitty Italy. There is the set that doesn't quite define what space belongs to the actors and what belongs to the audience. And then there is the wise-cracking Musician who welcomes you in and entertains you until the play. It's a pre-show that practically jumps up and yells "Benvenuto!"

It is also exactly what McCrea's translation calls for. Rozsa knows that an audience needs to be warmed up for a show like this. It's hard to come in off the chilly streets and be ready for in-your-face slapstick. This pre-show entertainment allows the audience to steal away from the New York winter outside and bask in Itty Bitty Italy's warm and welcoming glow.

Scapin follows a pretty standard classical storyline. Two young men, scions of the richest families in town, have fallen in love with women their rapacious fathers would never approve of. Young, rich, and handsome, they are unfortunately not the brightest bulbs, so it's up to Scapin, the wily servant, to save the day. There will, of course, be sight gags and naughty humor. Secret identities and shocking revelations. Heck, they'll even throw in some puppets for good measure.

The cast of *Scapin* does a marvelous job. Most notable is Spencer Aste as the vulpine Scapin. Silver-tongued and not at all trustworthy, Scapin is a wonderful character and Aste seems to have a great deal of fun playing him. As the miserly fathers, John Freimann and Roger Grunwald create grotesque and amusing caricatures, each with wonderful idiosyncrasies – Freimann with a stoop and a weirdly bum leg, the fan-wielding Grunwald with a voice that is equal parts Leslie Jordan and Truman Capote. Though the roles of the young lovers are underwritten, the four actors playing them, Nico Evers-Swindell, Matt Luceno, Maya Rosewood, and Catherine Wronowski, each have several moments to shine . . . and sigh and swoon and pine as all comedic young lovers must. Also praise-worthy is the juggling, guitar-playing, balloon-animal making Jay Painter, who greets the audience and keeps them entertained before the show and during intermission (he also plays a Porter and provides incidental music and sound effects during the play). His wide, toothy grin and willingness to do anything for a laugh are remarkable.

Production values are strong. Keven Lock's bright and electrically vibrant sets perfectly frame A. Christina Giannini's '70s-inspired (and one suspects vintage, in some cases) costumes. Eric Larson's lighting shows everything off to great advantage.

Scapin does have its share of slow moments, and like many other slapstick comedies, relies heavily on the audience being really into the show. In addition, there are the usual line flubs, costume malfunctions, and prop problems that are part of live theatre. To their credit, the cast does a good job of covering when needed.