
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Heir Not So Apparent

Sylvie Drake · Wednesday, June 24th, 2015

There is a little cream puff of a play going on at International City Theatre (ICT) in Long Beach. It's called *The Heir Apparent* and comes from the pen of a favorite playwright. His name is David Ives and his earmarks are a nimble mind with plenty of wit delivered with a very light hand.

For those who don't know him, Ives is best-known at the moment for his erotic 2011 two-hander, *Venus In Fur*, elevated by a striking performance from Nina Arianda that took Broadway by storm. It has been produced pretty widely since then. But the fact is that Ives' most original skill remains that of a kind of playwrighting puzzle-maker.

As a young man out of Northwestern and Yale, and between one job and another, Ives wrote some gimmicky one-acts, with truly fresh or clever twists. In 1993, a half-dozen of them were staged under the collective title *All In the Timing*. They struck a universal funny bone and propelled him into the limelight. One of the most enchanting things Ives has been doing in recent years is adapting musty French farces into anachronistic comedies that indulge liberally in literary inside jokes and are delivered in the best French tradition: rhymed couplets. Try it some time.

The choice one is *The Liar*, translated from Corneille. *The Heir Apparent*, which followed and is now at Long Beach, is not quite up to that level of wit (although it has its moments), but the game Long Beach cast gives it a good shot.

This piece, adapted from Jean-François Regnard's *Le Légataire Universel* (literally, *The Universal Heir*, but more accurately signifying *The Heir Apparent*), is as forgotten in French literary history as its author, although PR materials quote none other than Voltaire as having written (in *On Comedy*) that "He who does not delight in Regnard is not worthy of admiring Molière." So there.



l-r, Wallace Angus Bruce, Paige Lindsey White (standing), Matthew Henerson & Adam J. Smith in *The Heir Apparent* at ICT.

At best, however, *The Heir Apparent* is a slender farce, full of improbability that Ives manages to make enjoyable by laughing *at* it as much as *with* it. The first act drags on a bit with more exposition than we need, but the second one zooms with farcical shenanigans and travesties that add up to considerable fun. It will never be a great piece or quite match *The Liar* in cleverness, but as the actors at ICT get more comfortable with playing this unusual brand of comedy, it should take on a fun life of its own.

Géronte (Matthew Henerson) is your stereotypical geriatric miser who lives only for his money, surrounded by all the underlings, relatives and acquaintances who'd like to get their hands on his cash. First in line is his penniless nephew Eraste (Wallace Angus Bruce), in love with Isabelle (Suzanne Jolie Narbonne), whom he wishes to marry, except that her buxom mother Madame Argante (Rebecca Spencer) won't allow it since Eraste has no money. Then we have a bunch of the rest of the classic *Commedia dell'Arte* characters: the shrewd servant Crispin (Adam J. Smith), in love with the smart maid Lisette (Paige Lindsey White), plus Géronte's dwarfish lawyer Scruple (Adam von Almen), tossed in for good measure.



l-r, Rebecca Spencer, Adam von Almen & Matthew Henerson in *The Heir Apparent* at ICT.

When the snotty, sniffing, grunting G ronte, one foot in the grave, decides that *he* will marry Isabelle so she can nurse him, her avaricious mother agrees while everyone else is aghast. The play naturally becomes all about how to separate the keeper of the keys from his locked-up fortune — and that will take some doing.

With the ingenious and nimble Crispin in charge, we go through several impossible schemes and disguises intended to make Eraste his uncle’s sole heir when G ronte gets ready to draw up his will that very afternoon. There is no need for any of it to make much sense, only to be funny; we can guess what the outcome will be. The point is not the story but how to tell it with gusto.

Director Matt Walker tries to make sure the production is the caricature it ought to be. All the over-the-top bits of business are nicely overblown and punched up with comic sound cues. There are some pretty crass jokes and some gross references here and there that could stand to be under rather than overplayed, in addition to plenty of more palatable funny stuff. None of it is meant to be taken too seriously, only to be savored for a couple of hours.

With a few more performances and a bit more grease in the wheels, the pace of the comedy should get up to speed and most logistical hiccups solved. David Ives remains a favorite. Kudos to ICT for undertaking a production that is almost as demanding as writing a play in rhymed couplets.

Top image: l-r, Adam J. Smith, Paige Lindsey White & Matthew Henerson in The Heir Apparent at ICT.

Photos by Suzanne Mapes.

WHAT: *The Heir Apparent*

WHERE: International City Theatre, Long Beach Performing Arts Center, 300 E. Ocean Blvd., Long Beach, CA 90802.

WHEN: Thursdays 8pm, today, July 2 & 9; Fridays 8pm, June 26, July 3 & 10; Saturdays, 8pm, June 27 & July 11; Sundays 2pm, June 28, July 5 & 12. No performance Saturday, July 4. Ends July 12.

HOW: Thursday-Friday tickets, \$46; Saturday-Sunday tickets, \$48. Available at 562.436.4610 or at www.InternationalCityTheatre.org.

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