

Triumph of Love

Directed by Brian Swasey

Produced by the Astoria Performing Arts Center

Variety Boys & Girls Club of Queens, 21-12 30th Road, Astoria

Review by Byrne Harrison

Having never read the Marivaux play upon which *Triumph of Love* is based, it's hard to say if the musical version is any better than the original, given the formulaic nature of many Restoration comedies. *Triumph of Love*, with book by James Magruder, music by Jeffrey Stock, and lyrics by Susan Birkenhead is enjoyable, if unremarkable. The book is amusing, but the characters are fairly two-dimensional and the wordplay, which trends toward naughty puns, seems forced. The music and lyrics are good, though it feels as though Stock and Birkenhead were writing an homage to their musical theatre forefathers (here's a song that sounds a little like Sondheim, and here's one that could have come from ... *Forum* or *Damn Yankees*).

The story is classical comedy, full of cross-dressing, star-crossed lovers, pompous elders, lusty servants, and a more-or-less happy ending. Agis (Tripp Pettigrew) is the rightful Prince of Sparta, whose throne has been taken, quite innocently on her part, by Princess Leonide (Abby Baum), his sworn enemy. In a twist that seems to happen quite a bit in these sorts of plays, Leonide has spotted Agis studying in his garden and has fallen in love with him. She sneaks into the garden of Hesione (Erika Amato) and Hermocrates (Richard Rice Alan), the aunt and uncle of Agis. Knowing that the severe philosopher Hermocrates and his sister Hesione would never allow a woman to remain in the garden, she dresses as a man. Leonide (in male drag) meets Agis and they become fast friends. Agis makes Leonide swear to help him kill his archenemy . . . Leonide. Hijinks ensue, aided by wily servants Harlequin (**Philip Deyesso**), Dimas (**Justin Birdsong**) and Corine (**Ashley Speigel**).

The story does offer some clever twists. Leonide, in order to stay in the garden, must pretend to be a friend and confidant with Agis, a lovestruck youth with Hesione, a silly girl with Hermocrates (who quickly figures out she's not a man), and must come up with lie after lie on the spot as her identity keeps coming close to being uncovered. Even she seems to have trouble keeping it all straight. In the end, all the lies are found out, truths are revealed, and love conquers all. Well, not quite all, but enough.

While the story is a trifle and the music is unremarkable, the Astoria Performing Arts Center chooses to make its production stand out by having a stellar cast. Amazing performances are given all around, with special praise going to Baum, as the love-struck heroine, Amato as Agis's icy aunt, who has given up love for logic, and Alan as the pompous academic, Hermocrates. Baum and Amato, in particular, have spectacular voices that make their performances a pleasure. Pettigrew as the conflicted hero, Agis, grows nicely from a boy who has lived his life in the isolation of books, into a man who, flooded with love, seems to have no idea what to do.

The production values are strong as well. **Michael P. Kramer's** set design is deceptively simple and with a few movable flats, manages to get to most out of the small stage, while still making room for director Brian Swasey's (in his last production as APAC's Artistic Director) rather exuberant choreography. **Adam Coffia's** costume design is excellent. The costumes for this production (some of which were provided by The Gallery Players, the TDF Costume Collection, and Penn State University) look wonderful and perfectly suit the characters. In particular, the costumes for Hesione and Hermocrates inform their characters well.

Although *Triumph of Love* itself is not a great musical, APAC's production is sure to please.