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## Arts & Entertainment:

### Central Works Revives Moliere's 'Misanthrope'

By Ken Bullock Special to the Planet  
Thursday May 28, 2009

In the back room of a mansion, a Pepto Bismol-swigging investigative reporter complains to his artist buddy that he hates parties, like the one still raging outside that he has fled. In fact, he hates a society that doesn't "speak from the heart."

His Machiavellian friend, clutching a cocktail and clad in a big, shiny suit and a wig showering ringlets (a tip of the hat to the fashions of the Sun King's court?) replies that some things are better lied about—and calls the reporter a misanthrope.

Central Works is reviving Gary Graves' adaptation of Moliere's Misanthrope. Graves, who also directs, first staged his version almost seven years ago. In its current incarnation, two of the cast of three are originals from that first premiere; the production team is also substantially the same.

Graves' adaptation, on which he collaborated with the actors and production team, brings Moliere's comedy—which has strong elements of farce—into present-day life. It also focuses on the love triangle between Alan, the reporter; Phil, his friend the artist; and Celia, the wealthy, widowed party girl both are stuck on.

Alan and Celia are played—and were originated—by Darren Bridgett and Deb Fink, two of the best farceurs in the Bay Area. They are ably assisted by Michael Navarra (who played in Central Works' Shadow Crossing a few years ago), who is not exactly a straight man, but more an eccentric than a clown (though his later entrance in bandages and the resulting funny gestures start to rival some of Fink and Bridgett's skillful schtick). Navarra also delivers a good, droll monologue on a spurned loanshark's revenge.

As ever, Central Works uses the Berkeley City Club salon theater adroitly. The 75-minute play is an unbroken set of humor, including some sleights of repetition (and a comic cross-examination) that parallel Moliere's classicist comic form. Graves' staging is deft, exploiting the comic virtues of his cast.

It's a tight little show, without a minute's letdown—excellent entertainment. It also subtly changes form somewhat, partly from its updating, and becomes a bit like an old screwball romantic comedy. Greg Scharpen's flavoring of the action and anecdotes with sound and music gives it a hint of cinema. Graves designed the lighting and Tammy Berlin, the costumes; both are spot on.

There are also a few, telling touches that not only modernize Moliere, but reflect, painfully, current-day fast-track "manners" (and cluelessness). When Alan exhorts Celia to join him and "leave all this," she's puzzled. "All what?"

And then their cellphones commence to sound.

#### MISANTHROPE

8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday; 5 p.m. Sunday through June 21 at Berkeley City Club, 2315 Durant Ave. \$14-25. 558-1381. centralworks.org.

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