

CENTER STAGE PRESS

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A Masterful Game of Chess

Baltimore—October 6, 2016.

Sex. Betrayal. Vengeance.

Center Stage opens its 2016/17 Season with a scandalous story from 18th-century France, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (Dangerous Liaisons). The production provides a glimpse into the lives of beautiful people poised to denigrate and control everyone around them, including each other.

Written by Christopher Hampton and based on the classic novel by Choderlos de Laclos, the play is set just before the French Revolution. Two aristocrats, Marquise de Merteuil and her ex-lover, the Vicomte de Valmont, challenge each other to seduce unsuspecting innocents. But when one of them actually falls in love, the real betrayals unfold.

The production's director, Center Stage Associate Artistic Director Hana S. Sharif, shares her stunning vision for *Les Liaisons* and her thoughts on why this story continues to be particularly relevant to audiences today.

Why did Center Stage choose to include *Les Liaisons* in this season's lineup?

There's something interesting about the questions raised by *Les Liaisons* at our current moment in time. The story is set at a moment right on the cusp of the French Revolution, a time when there had been no greater divide between the haves and the have-nots, the aristocracy and the common man. But inside the world of the play, people feel very isolated from the poverty and the dangers of a world on the edge. And that resonated with me in 2016. Anywhere you look in the world today, it feels like we're just the razor's edge away from World War III, but part of the insulation and the privilege of the life that most of us live is that we can pretend as if that's not really the case, because it doesn't necessarily influence our day-to-day life.

I also think this play challenges the concepts of power and gender and what we believe about sex. It's exciting to kick off the season with a female protagonist who is an intellectual giant—who gets to be deliciously manipulative and evil. I've been talking about the play as a "clash of titans" or a "game of gods" between Merteuil and Valmont. These two figures are deeply flawed people—they are all at once magnetic and irresistible and dangerous in every way. And they are playing a masterful game of chess, where the other people on stage don't recognize they're pawns.

As the director, what is your vision for the production?

I wanted the production to be both period but contemporary in its energy, to be sleek and sexy, and to challenge us and illuminate something about our own nature.

I've been a little bit obsessed with the game of chess concept, which I think you'll see in the set. It's a sleek, sophisticated, highly reflective set. We have reflective floors, mirrored walls, chandeliers...everything speaks in metaphor to the concept of illumination.

It's also a play of perception—the public self vs. the private self. It's about the many different ways a person is seen, and how we can manipulate how people see us.



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The costumes are lush and beautiful and everything you think of with this Marie Antoinette-period of France. Luxurious. Daring necklines. I think if you're coming to see a great period piece you're going to be satisfied. And if you're coming to see something that speaks to your contemporary sensibility, you're going to be fulfilled.

How do you make a story set in 18th-century Paris relevant to a 21st-century audience in Baltimore?

Great theater is transformative and timeless. From the beginning of time, people have had the same desires, and they've played out in the same ways. Love, sex, vengeance, fear, pain, hurt, abandonment, possession—all of these ideas are as relevant today as they were in 10 AD. When I approach a piece set in one time period, I try to get to the heart of the human condition being addressed. If we as the creative team do our work, then the relevancy is very present for the audience. Then the setting becomes the icing—it could be set anywhere.

What do you hope the audience takes away from each performance?

I try not to project what an audience should get from a show; my goal is to illuminate the questions. I hope our audiences find themselves in complicated relationships with the characters—torn between love and disgust. This is a play where people do terrible things to each other on stage, but somehow we understand how they ended up there. We don't think of them as monsters, even when they're doing monstrous things.

The play has been performed on Broadway twice before (1987 and 2008) and will begin a new run this October with Janet McTeer and Live Schreiber. What will be different about Center Stage's production?

What I love about live theater is that you can see three versions of the same play and walk away with three completely different perspectives, because the production shapes the play. I think the reason there's such appeal for this play—the reason it can play Broadway three times and be produced as a movie and be translated in multiple languages—is because it speaks to some of our most elemental desires and foibles as human beings.

In America, there's a lot of hyper-realism that we put on stage, which is wonderful and part of our aesthetic, but there is something about melodrama—the honesty of swinging from one extreme to the other—that allows us to really see ourselves. And I think that Christopher Hampton's adaptation of the book does a masterful job setting every production on the right path.

What has been the biggest challenge so far?

The search for the right actress to play Marquise de Merteuil for our production. Casting this role was a challenge, in part, because the role of Merteuil is beautiful and delicious, but it's for a woman of a certain age. The wonderful thing is there are a lot of TV opportunities that have opened up for super talented women in our field, as well as more leading roles in new plays in New York, and it was difficult to find someone who has the skill and craft to carry the show, who's not already on TV, doing film, or willing to leave New York or L.A. Finding our Merteuil has been quite the journey, but I think we've come up with an extraordinary group of people for this cast.

If you were to think of a modern-day fictional La Marquise de Merteuil or Le Vicomte de Valmont, who comes to mind?

Don Draper—he definitely would be a Valmont-esque person. And Miranda Priestley from *The Devil Wears Prada*. She didn't lean into her sexy or use her sensuality in the way Merteuil does, but she certainly has the power moves. If you were to partner that with a very forward, daring sex appeal, that would be an excellent Merteuil-esque character.

