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John Angell Grant / Los Gatos News

Sara Trupski (left), James Mantell (center) and Katie Chaidez appear in a scene from the Festival Theater Ensemble production of Moliere's "Tartuffe."

'Tartuffe' gallivants under stars

By John Angell Grant / Theater Reviewer

The best summer theater on the Peninsula for the last few years has been the outdoor Shakespeare and other classics produced by Festival Theater Ensemble, and presented by the Menlo Players Guild.

This year they've done it again, with an extremely well-acted and well-staged production of Moliere's comedy "Tartuffe," currently running under the stars at Mid-Peninsula High School in Menlo Park. Admission to this show is free, making it hands-down the best entertainment bargain on the Peninsula.

In "Tartuffe," an elderly matriarch and her pompous son fall under the spell of a religious hypocrite who presents himself as a model of moral behavior.

Though most other family members spot this dedicated moralist, named Tartuffe, as a fraud, the matriarch and her son proceed comically to turn the family upside down in efforts to get children, grandchildren, servants and others to model their own behavior on the annoying houseguest.

Discord emerges and violence threatens. Siblings disagree on how to respond to the saintly moralist who has weaseled his way into the family. Suggested approaches range from violence to diplomacy.

Elsewhere a daughter of the household finds herself ripped from an engagement to her fiance, and instead suddenly promised in marriage to Tartuffe. Sex, as it turns out, is where Tartuffe shows his weakness. (It is a French play, after all.)

This is a rich and professional staging by the Festival Theater Ensemble. If you enjoy

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good theater, don't miss it. There are many strong performances.

Leslie Newport sets high performance standards early as grande dame Madame Pernelle, the family matriarch who buys into the moral posturing of Tartuffe. Katie Chaidez steals her scenes as the clever, saucy and exasperated housemaid Doreen, insolently talking back to her master and trying to knock sense into the befuddled heads of the household.

James Tate is creepy as the slippery moralist Tartuffe, on a mission to do something, though at first it's not quite clear what. Soon he puts a move on one of the married women, which has the paradoxical effect of upping the household's denial of Tartuffe's scheming ways.

James Mantell is wonderful as stuffed-shirt blowhard Orgon, the head of household, who decides to fix Tartuffe up with his daughter, to her great dismay. Sara Trupski and Drew Raboy are amusing as star-crossed lovers filled with hysterical self-pity, making their own lives comically worse.

"Tartuffe" is about the psychology and politics of people who parade their religious beliefs, and how the world reacts to that.

As one character comments, in the world of "Tartuffe," things are so turned around that the clear-thinking person is accused of being an infidel.

Director Amy Himes has done a terrific job of staging a clear and accessible performance of American poet Richard Wilbur's lyrical and humorous translation of the Moliere original.

Although this is a broad comedic production, with lots of arm-waving humor and exaggerated performance touches, the actors keep the characters real. Costume designer Amy Zsadanyi-Yale has dressed it all in striking period costumes.

In "Tartuffe," the people who parade their religious beliefs turn out to be the bigots. This creates a world of fools in which common sense threatens to vanish.

"Tartuffe" runs one more weekend in repertory with Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" and "Pericles" at the Mid-Peninsula High School in Menlo Park, before moving in July to Oak Meadow Park in downtown Los Gatos.

Rating: Four stars

E-mail John Angell Grant at jagplays@dailynewsgroup.com.

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