

THE WITLESS LADY

Reviewed by Anne Louise Bannon

Lope de Vega was to Spanish theatre what Shakespeare was to English theatre, and was roughly contemporary with the great Bard. De Vega, however, was considerably more prolific, writing up to 1,800 plays. Of those, the harmless little pastiche *The Witless Lady* (*La Dama Boba*) is probably among the better known. The production by the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts production plays into the silliness, creating a bit of fluff that is easily consumed and all the more delightful for its age.

Finea (Diana Barrows) is the lovely but stupid daughter of Octavio (German Leonne). Nise (Rosita Fernandez) is her equally beautiful but considerably wiser sister. Liseo (Jaime Arze) is contracted to marry Finea, but is turned off by her idiocy and instead falls for Nise. Meanwhile, Laurencio (John Paul) has been making up to Nise, but wants to marry Finea for her fortune, inherited from an uncle. And so forth and so on, with the "witless" Finea growing wiser through the power of love.

It is to adaptor and director Agustín Coppola's credit that at no point in the play does anyone take anything seriously. Barrows is wonderful as the witless-turned-wise innocent. One usually wants to take actors to task for putting on silly faces, but Barrows not only makes it work, she uses it to great effect when she must play-act her former witlessness to get the husband she wants. Leonne's work as the put-upon father starts out at full throttle and does not let up, but again, it is in service to the script and works. And as the greedy Laurencio, Paul is so charming that you can believe that Nise still wants him even though she knows he's after her sister's fortune.

It's rare that you find a set as nice as Estela Scarlata's. True to its Spanish heritage, the garden setting here creates the perfect fairy tale atmosphere. The play is supposedly set in the early 17th century, but it must be very early in the century, because Carlos Brown's men's costumes look a lot more like late 16th century to me. The ladies' dresses are something else again, more suggestive of the era than accurate (am I the only one who finds zippers on period clothes really distracting?).

The production plays in both English and Spanish on alternating weekends with mostly the same cast.

"*The Witless Lady* (*La Dama Boba*)," presented by and at the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts, 421 N. Avenue 19, Los Angeles. Apr. 23-June 6.

<http://www.backstagewest.com/aisle/theater/reviews/la/ala1999051925826.asp>

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