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Indiana Repertory Theatre

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A Study Guide for Teachers for

The Rivals

by Richard Brinsley Sheridan

October 24, 1989-November 18, 1989

Directed by Tom Haas

Scenic Design: Ann Sheffield
Costume Design: Gail Brassard
Lighting Design: Don Holder

Sound Design: Michael Bosworth
Production Stage Manager: Joel Grynheim
Assistant Stage Manager: David Dreyfoos

Study Guide materials compiled by Associate Artistic Director Janet Allen

Synopsis

Lydia Languish, the wealthy sentimental heroine whose fortune is dependent upon the whims of her aunt, Mrs. Malaprop, is in love with Captain Jack Absolute, alias Ensign Beverley. Sir Anthony Absolute meets with Mrs. Malaprop in an attempt to match his son with Lydia. The elders agree but confusion of identities leads to may comic incidents. Parellel plots involve the bumbling Bob Acres, in love with Lydia; the tempestuous Irishman Sir Lucius O'Trigger, who carries on an amorous but mistaken correspondence with Mrs. Malaprop; and a sentimental second pair of lovers, Faulkland and Julia. Due to many comic mishaps, the men become involved in a duel, which is averted by the unravelling of the mistaken identity plot and the reuniting of the estranged lovers. The play vacillates between high comedy and farce as it pokes not always gentle fun at excessive sentimentality. Mrs. Malaprop's ludicrous distortions of the language make her one of the most famous characters in English drama.

The Rivals—A Critical Overview

The IRT opens its 18th season Oct. 24 with an 18th-century English comedy that celebrates the romance of the spoken word. *The Rivals* playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan spent a lifetime intimately involved with writing and speaking the English language: first as a playwright, later as an outspoken member of Parliament.

In *The Rivals*, written in 1775, Sheridan explores verbal communication through the creation of several stratas of characters who use language very differently: two sets of young lovers—Lydia and Jack, Julia and Faulkland; their admonishing and tyrannical parental figures—Sir Anthony and Mrs. Malaprop; two inept country bumpkins—Bob Acres and Sir Lucius O'Trigger; and their conniving servants—Fag and Lucy.

The Rivals is set in Bath, that sophisticated watering spa which rose to unparalleled popularity at the end of the 18th century. The country gentry went to Bath much the same way as our contemporaries go to the Caribbean: for relaxation, entertainment and intrigue. Bath provided the perfect opportunity for romance to bloom, sparks to fly, oaths to be sworn and weapons to be drawn. The 1770's, in addition, were a time of an emerging youthful class who actively re-defined themselves in a search for independence from their elders. In a comic fashion, Sheridan anticipated the Victorians—who were to romanticize characters that turn the tables on their parents and encouraged the forces of nature through towering passions.

The Rivals (1775) is caught between two literary styles—one, characterized by the lusty, hearty, outrageous bucolic behavior of Henry Fielding's country folk (e.g. *Tom Jones*, 1749) and the other, the genteel and delicate mores of Jane Austen's landed gentry (e.g. *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813).

In Austen's world, a young woman's fortunes rose or fell by her ability to attain a realistic outlook, one unclouded by sudden passion, light romance or deceiving egoism; a young man was rewarded for the sincerity and durability of his feeling rather than his fire of courtship.

Romance, to Sheridan, was the ability to articulate precisely all the feelings and gradations of passion through language and the spoken word. When language breaks down, the human persona becomes unfixed and disintegrates into irrational impulses. Any inclination toward romance, to living life beyond the construction of the mind and rational language, must, to Sheridan, be viewed as folly.

Lydia's desire for a dark romantic hero of action—one who will stand in a snowy garden under her window until icicles form on his ears and chin—was meant by Sheridan to alert the viewer to her comically dangerous tendencies to "romanticize" love. Faulkland's desire to "test" his love should also sound comic alarm bells for the audience, because he

Richard Brinsley Sheridan--Playwright and Politician

"An ornament of private and of public life, a satirist beloved of his friends, a wit and a patriot to boot; a poet and an honest man."

Hazlitt

"He who has written the two best comedies of his age is surely a considerable man."

Samuel Johnson

Richard Brinsley Sheridan was born in Dublin in 1751--making him a countryman of his delightful character, Sir Lucius O'Trigger, and of such significant Nineteenth century writers as Wilde and Shaw. His grandfather, a mildly eccentric clergyman, had been a friend of Jonathan Swift. It is not coincidental that Richard was to become a lover of language in its many applications: his father was an actor, a teacher of elocution, and later a writer of linguistic manuals; his mother was a playwright and a novelist. Given this background, it is easy to imagine the Sheridan household as a hotbed of literary and linguistic debates, perhaps even a place in which "malapropisms" were an entertainment around the dinner table. It was an era which spawned many new studies of language (Samuel Johnson's famed dictionary was published in 1755); Sheridan's own father was to publish a dictionary in the late 1770's. Sheridan's adult reputation for being a "wordslayer"--first as a playwright, and later as a politican--was, no doubt, honestly won.

The young Brinsley's formal education was spotty at best, largely due to his father's precarious financial situation: Sheridan spent six years at Harrow School, while his family fled the bill collectors in France, where his mother died in 1766. Sheridan had hoped to go to Oxford, but the family's financial constraints made this impossible. Instead, he joined his father and siblings in London, and was introduced, at 17, to the social attractions of the town.

In 1770, Sheridan's father, after several failed attempts at theatrical producing, packed up the family and moved to Bath, where he hoped to institute a school of elocution. He believed that training in the articulation of ideas would do much to improve men involved in the public life of England, and managed to find a few young noblemen to take as pupils from among the many idle rich who sought the pleasures, as well as the curative effects of the hot springs, of Bath. When an insufficient number of students materialized, Sheridan's father returned to Dublin and his old profession of acting, leaving the children, who were nearly adults, behind in Bath.

There is little question that the youthful Sheridan found ample opportunity for social education in Bath; he later described the period as one in which he "danced with all the women; wrote sonnets and verses in praise of some, satires and lampoons upon others, and in a very short time became the established wit and fashion of the place."

Harris tells me that the least shilling I shall get (if it succeeds) will be six hundred pounds.

The play that Sheridan had written in six short weeks was *The Rivals.* Here, as well as in Sheridan's other dramatic work of 1774-6, much of what had recently happened to him is to be found. Duelling, parental tyranny, secretive courtships, chivalric elopement and rivalry--he had lived though them all. The romantic pretensions of the young are also well exhibited and lampooned in *The Rivals*, suggesting that even within a year of his marriage, Sheridan had developed a sense of humor about the fleeting powers of romance.

Sheridan quickly followed the success of *The Rivals* with *St. Patrick's Day* and *The Duenna* : while *The Rivals* received acclaim during Sheridan's lifetime, *The Duenna* , a light opera, was a runaway hit and commercial success in the era and is nearly forgotten today. Covent Garden's rival theatre in London in the 1770's was the Drury Lane, managed for many years by the great actor, David Garrick, who was approaching the end of his career and looking for a successor. In 1776 Sheridan, in partnership with his father-in-law, took over the management of Drury Lane Theatre, and for the next 33 years, no matter what other activities he undertook, Sheridan was to remain, for better or worse, manager of the Drury Lane.

In 1778, Sheridan wrote what was to be his theatrical masterpiece, *The School for Scandal* and in 1779, he wrote *The Critic*, a wicked satire of a profession that caused him trouble as a theatrical producer. After that, Sheridan left writing for the theatre forever.

The reason was that in 1780 Sheridan was elected a Whig member of Parliament for the borough of Stafford, and thus began his second, and to him much more important, career as a politician. Two socials codes of Georgian England are significant to remember in context of Sheridan's defection into politics: first, Sheridan was determined to establish himself in the world of politics and fashion. He realized that although England's aristocracy allowed artists to associate freely with them, this privilege was never to be mistaken for an acceptance as equals. And such was Brinsley's pride that acceptance as an equal would alone satisfy him. Second, Sheridan was a businessman whose name became a symbol for financial irregularity and glamorous debt: the Drury Lane supported Sheridan's adventures through a long line of mortgages, borrowings, interest and debt (it also paid for his heavy election costs). Members of Parliament were immune from arrest for debt; when, after more than a quarter of a century in the House of Commons, he finally lost his seat, he was promptly in serious legal trouble over his financial improprieties.

In Parliament, Sheridan made a reputation for himself as a fiery orator, a vigorous member of the Opposition, a publicized lady's man and, paradoxically, for total honesty. His "poor, but proud" mien kept him from accepting the bribes and offers of pension that were as common in his era

theatre

Gail Brassard, costume rendering for Lydia Languish in The Rivals. *pencil, 16" × 11", 1989*

was panned opening night, Sheridan re-worked it.

Allen studied the differences between those two texts. She also studied alterations made in 19th-century performances of the play.

"If a popular actress appeared in the role of Mrs. Malaprop or Bob Acres, that role was greatly embellished, and others were cut," she said. The acting text you hear tonight has drawn on all versions of the play.

Then there is the issue of length. An 18th-century audience could sit more than three hours for a play. "Television, however has seriously reduced our 20th-century attention spans," she said. Hence, the delicate task of editting the play without losing its comic punch or its poignant subplot.

Allen makes her cuts—Haas makes his—and the two sit down to decide on common ground. The acting text is born through this debate.

The actors arrive late in Allen's process, just three-and-a-half weeks before opening. But it is perhaps the most demanding period. On a play like *The Rivals*, it is her job to barter (good-naturedly) with actors about lines they would like reinstated; to make sure the actors' interpretations serve to enhance the text; to be a second eye to director Haas so that blocking and production values tell the story.

Between rehearsals and production meetings, Allen provides research for the administrative staff as well. Her articles grace the pages of the theatre's quarterly, the *IRT Marquee*. Her background articles prepare the box office for questions from patrons. Her textbooks and photography provide artwork for the program.

Even more important, she creates study guides and slide shows to prepare several thousand Central Indiana students for their experience at *The Rivals* student matinees.

And sandwiched between *those* tasks, she's already starting to prepare us all for Agatha Christie's *Black Coffee*, and William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

the winter in concentrated form of the fashionables of the upper and upper middle classes meant that current attitudes and standards of social behavior were clearly demonstrated to be emulated or criticized. Of course the British moral sense was wonderfully satisfied at this resort since it was clearly a duty of the governing class to keep fit and gain health and vigor from the medicinal waters by drinking or immersion.

Bath in the early Eighteenth Century must have been much like San Francisco in the early Nineteenth Century: essentially a cow town, rather far off the beaten track of society, where people of every social strata mingled (frequently with altercation), in an unsanitary, disorganized and chaotic city, ill-equipped for such rapid growth. Enter one Beau Nash, a rakish gambler who arrived in Bath in the first decade of the Eighteenth Century, ready to take the town for every cent he could honestly or dishonestly acquire. Through some process of salvation, Beau Nash became Bath's most influential citizen, the master of ceremonies of the baths and the accepted "King of Bath." With the assistance of some wealthy town fathers and architect John Wood, Nash transformed Bath into a vacationland paradise of beauty, order and decorum. In 1705, when Nash arrived in Bath, he found it in terrible disrepair, a sinkhole of vice and bad manners; when he died in 1761, Bath was an elegant, clean city with sweeping outdoor walks, stately Georgian rowhouses, elegant public gathering places and a code of social behavior that governed nearly every aspect of social interaction, dress and manners.

Nash seemed to expend his greatest energies on ridding Bath of violence, the excesses of dancing and gambling, and the iniquities of social interaction in the public spaces. First, Nash banned duelling, and went so far as to forbid the wearing of swords in the city. In this period, swords were normal items of outdoor dress; to carry a sword was the mark of a gentleman. So rigid and lastingly effective was the ban that more than 50 years later, Captain Absolute in *The Rivals* is constrained to hide his sword under his greatcoat while on the way to an outlawed duel. In spite of Nash, duels were, of course, still arranged and some were fought, but the city authorities cooperated with the Master of Ceremonies and acted vigorously whenever news of an impending meeting leaked out. Nash's ban in Bath is considered, by historians, instrumental in ridding England and the Continent of this violent practice of settling quarrels by injury or death.

Another of Nash's rules applied to limiting the hours of entertainment: where once the gambling, drinking and dancing went on all night or as long as those present could see the cards or stand on their feet, Nash instituted an 11 p.m. curfew on all public entertainments. The official drink of the bi-weekly balls was changed from alcoholic punch to tea, and even George II's daughter, Princess Amelia, was firmly refused an extra dance after the clock had struck eleven. Gambling was banned in all but the public, city-operated establishments and attempts to control high play were

Treading the Thin Line of Comedic Style: Laughing Comedy vs. Sentimental Comedy

In this age of freedom of speech and writing, few of us remember that governmental censorship of arts, particularly of theatre, has been a fact of many cultures throughout history. While the United States has been mercifully free of such tyrannies (assuming, of course that those freedoms survive the current siege against the National Endowment for the Arts), censorship of literature was a fact of life for a writer in England even well into the twentieth century. For instance, a young writer, such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan, setting out to write a comedy in 1774, had not only to please producers, critics and audiences, but had to write a play that the King's censors would find acceptable. The functional body determining what would be censored in England has traditionally been the Lord Chamberlain's Office: each play had to be licensed for production by this body. In Sheridan's time it meant that a writer must avoid writing about political affairs if he wanted his play produced, and since the Lord Chamberlain's Office was manned by members of the establishment of the day, he had to keep clear also of social attitudes that were too revolutionary, or that offended prevailing standards of taste in middle- and upper-class circles.

In addition to passing the censor, a successful playwright had to capture the fashion of the day in terms of playwrighting style: this also is a foreign concept to us who live in an era in which styles and forms of literature appear to have no boundaries. But in the latter half of the eighteenth century in England, a debate was raging among writers and critics about the proscribed manner for writing comedies. Briefly, the two camps in this discourse broke down into those in favor of writing Laughing Comedies, and those who adhered to the more recent development of Sentimental Comedy.

Comedy is a very social art form: it responds, as tragedy or drama does not, to the tides of the time because it lampoons social conventions of a particular culture and era. Consequently, comedy often does not translate well into another milieu: only great comedies survive the test of time.

Laughing Comedy (or Robust Comedy) is a tradition of long standing in the theatre: beginning with the Greeks, writers of this genre assume that any foible, no matter how low-brow, could form the subject of comedy. Often the subject matter of these comedies was morally lax, featuring self-indulgent, egotists, wayward wives, cuckolded husbands and double-dealing friends. The comedic situations were often dramatized through farce, or physical comedy, thus leaving little room for intellectual substance. This form of comedy was particularly popular in the seventeenth century, when style in all forms of literature tended toward the playfully ribald, the boisterous, and the slightly naughty. Restoration Comedy typified this genre, featuring such titles as *Love in a Wood, Love*

The Rivals holds so many similarities to *She Stoops to Conquer* that critics have humorously referred to it as *He Stoops to Conquer.* Both plays feature masquerade and mistaken identity--farce ideas that are native to Laughing Comedy. Both feature two sets of lovers and an elderly, pretentious Aunt or guardian who wields economic power to such a degree that the nieces can not marry without their consent. Both plays feature "rustic" or country characters who provide not only many absurd, comic antics but a sociological contrast to the fashionable characters. Considering the resemblances, it was fitting that a number of original cast members who appeared in *The Rivals* had previously appeared in *She Stoops to Conquer* two years earlier. [Note: IRT is mirroring this tradition in the casting of Bella Jarrett as Mrs. Malaprop--who played Mrs. Hardcastle in *She Stoops* in 1982; and Scott Wentworth as Jack Absolute--who played Charles Marlowe in IRT's *She Stoops.*]

But these eighteenth century Laughing Comedies were more morally conventional than their seventeenth century precursors. In many ways Sheridan managed to combine the best of both traditions: virtue and true love triumph, amid witty gossip, sparkling dialogue, and comic intrigue. Critic John Loftis writes:

Sheridan's plays share many qualities with the plays and novels of the "sentimentalists:" an admiring toleration, even love for eccentric characters; an assumption that a ready sympathy for distressed persons is preferable to a ready wit in conversation; an inclination to regard seemingly wicked persons as reclaimable; and a tacit assumption that a kindly providence guides events to a prosperous conclusion for those characters who possess the gift of charity.

Thus, Sheridan found a way to balance burlesque without oppressive gentility, fashion without pretension and the celebration of true feeling without prudishness. He created a comedy of laughter with moral responsibility.

Sheridan's plays did much to recapture the former brilliance of English drama, and with the exception of Shakespeare's plays, his (and Goldsmith's) have held the stage more consistently than have those of any other English comic dramatist.

Janet Allen