

GREENWICH STUDIO THEATRE

The Will

By Pierre Marivaux

23rd February 1995 – 26th March 1995

Translated by Michael Sadler

Directed by Margarete Forsyth

Reviews

THE TIMES

FRIDAY MARCH 3 1995

Legacy of laughter

THE original title of Mari-vaux's neat 80-minute comedy is *Le Legs*, which looks more like Franglais, and slightly drunk Franglais at that, but means "the legacy". A legacy must be *un legs*, and that looks totally lushed.

But the play's the thing, not the unexpected quaintness of a sister tongue, and in Michael Sadler's brisk, colloquial translation the bumpy paths of love are enjoyably followed towards a happy ending for all three couples.

An awkward will has turned the paths into a maze. The Marquis has been left 200,000 francs provided he marries Hortense, whom he does not love at all — and who does not love him either, preferring the relatively impecunious Chevalier. Since the Marquis is hugely rich he has no need of the legacy, but it is the principle of the thing: he will have to hand Hortense the

The Will Greenwich Studio

money if they do not marry. Whichever choice he makes is going to hurt. Added to which, he is utterly in love with the Countess but, try as she can, she has not managed to persuade the nervous fellow to utter the necessary.

Strategies are required to sort matters out to general satisfaction. There are two pert servants, of course, since this is a Marivaux play, but they take an unusually modest role in the proceedings. Stephen Stigwood's Lepine does conveniently discover that he has broken his back when the wrong marriage looks almost certain and he is ordered to fetch the lawyer. Charlotte Randle's Lisette takes the opposing side and advises the Countess to stay unmarried.

So it is left to Sallyanne Law's Hortense, using poker-faced cunning, and Illona Linthwaite's Countess, exasperated into boldness, to engineer the solution. The end would be reached virtually at the beginning if the Marquis could only summon up the nerve to declare himself, but even when he does so he forgets to listen to her reply.

Marivaux postpones the inevitable by making him, with many affectionate touches, comically pedantic and hesitant, and Julian Forsyth expresses these qualities through tone of voice — "I am a shade inhibited," he mutters — and engagingly absurd body-language. His legs incline him across the flagstones towards his lady-love while his head hangs back.

Linthwaite, alternately cooing and crisp, conveys bafflement in her murmuring Joan Greenwoody voice, and attacks the wilting plants in her conservatory with shears when words fail her. Margaret Forsyth's direction speeds the story onward, and with the final embrace the fountain jets into action. Delightful.

JEREMY KINGSTON



Where there's a will: Illona Linthwaite, Julian Forsyth

THE WILL

Greenwich

I HAVE a certain stake in *The Will*. Six years ago I directed Marivaux's little jewel of a comedy with a group of RSC actors in the Barbican Conservatory.

Now I'm delighted to see the play turning up again in Michael Sadler's brisk and funny translation at Greenwich Studio Theatre: it confirms my feeling that Marivaux is drama's Mozart in his combination of formal elegance and piercing insight. The conflict here is between love and money. A Marquis, by the terms of a cruel will, stands either to gain or lose a small fortune depending on whether or not he marries an affected aristocrat.

The trouble is he's shyly smitten by an abrasive Countess but doesn't want to sacrifice his claims to the loot. With mathematical precision, Marivaux pins down the marital brinkmanship people go through in order to boost their credit balance. At the same time, in the confrontation of the dithering Marquis and the testy Countess — both wanting each other but both afraid to say so — he writes what must be the funniest wooing scene in 18th-century comedy.

It is, however, a devil of a play to direct because it's all talk. I set it in the 1930s to give it a naturalistic base. Margarete Forsyth, as director and co-designer, puts it in the correct 1730s period and preserves Sadler's invented setting of a mildewed, run-down conservatory. What she brings out clearly is the chess-move nature of each scene, and the manipulative shrewdness of the two servants, nicely played by Stephen Stigwood and Charlotte Randle. Comic tempo is sometimes sacrificed to point-making but this is a delightful revival of a mini-masterpiece that makes one long for more Marivaux.

□ At Greenwich Studio Theatre (081-858 2862) until March 26

Michael Billington

ILONA LINTHWAITE AS
THE COUNTESS



CARLA WATSON

THE WILL

The Greenwich Studio Theatre has made a reputation for itself by reviving European classics, which theatregoers have little opportunity of seeing elsewhere.

Until recently, the plays of Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux (1688-1763) were hardly ever acted in England. A major turning point came in the mid-1980s, when Mike Alfreds and his designer, Paul Dart, successfully revived *L'Heureux Stratege* and *Les Fausses Confidences*, in two alternating productions, for Shared Experience.

Marivaudage (a term once used disparagingly to describe his extreme subtlety of language and feeling) may no longer be a term of abuse, but English actors and English translators are still not comfortable with his idiosyncratic style. He has, as yet, not been

produced by either the RNT or the RSC: though the critic Michael Billington did once direct RSC actors in a Fringe production of *Les Leges*, updated to the Edwardian era and performed in the Barbican's conservatory.

Marivaux offers superb roles for actresses and it is a great pity that we have never been able to see Maggie Smith and Prunella Scales play the subtle and witty heroines he created for the French actress, Silvia, and which have been acted with such distinction by Madeleine Renaud.

The Will (1736, one of Marivaux's most popular plays in the 18th and 19th century) has just six characters – four aristocrats and two servants, all of them good parts – and is ideal for an intimate space. There is no plot, only a situation. By the terms of the will, if the Marquis does not propose marriage to Hortense, he stands to lose 2000,000 francs. If she turns him down, she stands to lose 200,000 francs. But he loves and wants to marry a Countess while she loves and wants to marry a Chevalier. Both men are prepared to throw away their happiness for what is, in effect, a paltry sum. The Chevalier, the poorer of the two, has more reason, since he well knows that if he cannot keep Hortense in the manner to which she is accustomed, he will not keep her for long.

The Marquis, who has no financial worries, describes himself, in one of theatre's great understatements, as being "a shade inhibited". He presumes that the Countess has rejected him, when she has done nothing of the sort. (How could she possibly have refused him when he hasn't actually got round to proposing?) He very nearly marries Hortense to spite Hortense. Julian Forsyth, pushing shyness to the very limits, is wonderfully, torturously, ill-at-ease while Ilona Linthwaite, finding herself accused of anger, hate and scorn, is as bewildered as she is exasperated.

Michael Sadler's translation is much more idiomatic than the French original. A programme note says a more faithful rendition would have been less enjoyable for a modern audience. Maybe, but it is not only purists who will wince at the anachronisms and Margarete Forsyth's attractive staging would be all the better for the removal of such indelicacies as "no go", "don't get shirty", "get up my nose" and "rub you up the wrong way". □

BY PIERRE MARIVAUX
TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL SADLER
FIRST PERFORMANCE ON 23RD
FEBRUARY, 1995 AT GREENWICH
STUDIO THEATRE

DIRECTOR MARGARETE FORSYTH
DESIGNER MARGARETE FORSYTH,
VICKY EMPTAGE

LIGHTING

LISETTE
LEPINE
HORTENSE
CHEVALIER
MARQUIS
COUNTESS

DAVID PLATER

CHARLOTTE RANDLE
STEPHEN STIGWOOD
SALLYANNE LAW
JEREMY SPRIGGS
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March 8-15

'The Will'

GREENWICH STUDIO

Frock-coats, corsets and buckled shoes are now synonymous with Greenwich Studio as the company pursues its mission to rescue eighteenth-century European drama from oblivion. Marivaux's 1736 comedy, given a slightly coarse and salty flavour in Michael Sadler's vigorous translation, fields three perfect couples who are, however, all at odds. Julian Forsyth's diffident Marquis loves Illona Linthwaite's bossy, sweet-eating Countess, but is too scared to say so; Sallyanne Law's Hortense and Jeremy Spriggs' Chevalier are a pair of impoverished chancers made for each other; while Lisette and Lepine, the servants of the Countess and the Marquis respectively, scheme and frustrate each other's plots with glee. She wants her mistress to stay single – he wants his master to wed. Complicating all this is a will compelling the Marquis to marry Hortense, or pay her a sizable sum. Will his meanness vanquish his heart?

It's a silly plot, but with brilliant characterisation it's carried off with aplomb. The picturesque garden set (sterling work by Vicky Emptage) makes explicit the shift from wintry sterility to spring-like joy (we begin with a thunderstorm and end with a birdsong), but Margarete Forsyth's direction is a little fussy: we're rather too aware of the constant pruning, watering, flower arranging and basket-hanging that accompanies the dialogue. Other bits of business are simply inspired, though. Charlotte Randle and Stephen Stigwood are both excellent as the deferent but self-assured servants. The subtle dynamic of the master-servant relationship emerges as one of the key themes in GST's informal season of enlightenment works. *Suzi Feay*

Play has the will to please

Money makes the world go round - or is it love? The choice between these two fuels the merry-go-round that is Pierre Marivaux's play *The Will*, in a delightful new production at Greenwich Studio Theatre.

The action is slight.

The appeal of the play lies in the delicate interplay between the characters, whether motivated by self-interest, desire or love. Marivaux is well-served by the cast at the Greenwich Studio.

Briefly, the Marquis is bound under a will to marry the coquettish Hortense, or pay her FF£200,000 in compensation. Hortense is in love with Chevalier, and between them they plan to force the Marquis to part with the compensation money so they can marry. The Marquis has fallen for the Countess, at whose country house the action takes place. Lisette and Lepine are the servants acting as their go-betweens.

Illona Linthwaite shines as the forthright Countess, blooming with awakening love. Julian Forsythe is equally charming as the dithering Marquis, so unsure of himself he cannot see the Countess' love.

Sallyanne Law brings a bright-eyed bounciness to the part of Hortense - in more ways than one;

the costumes for *The Will* display more pneumatics than an episode of *The Buccaneers*. Charlotte Randle is ascerbic and sharp-tongued as Lisette, and Stephen Stigwood nearly steals the show as the scheming, cocky manservant Lepine.

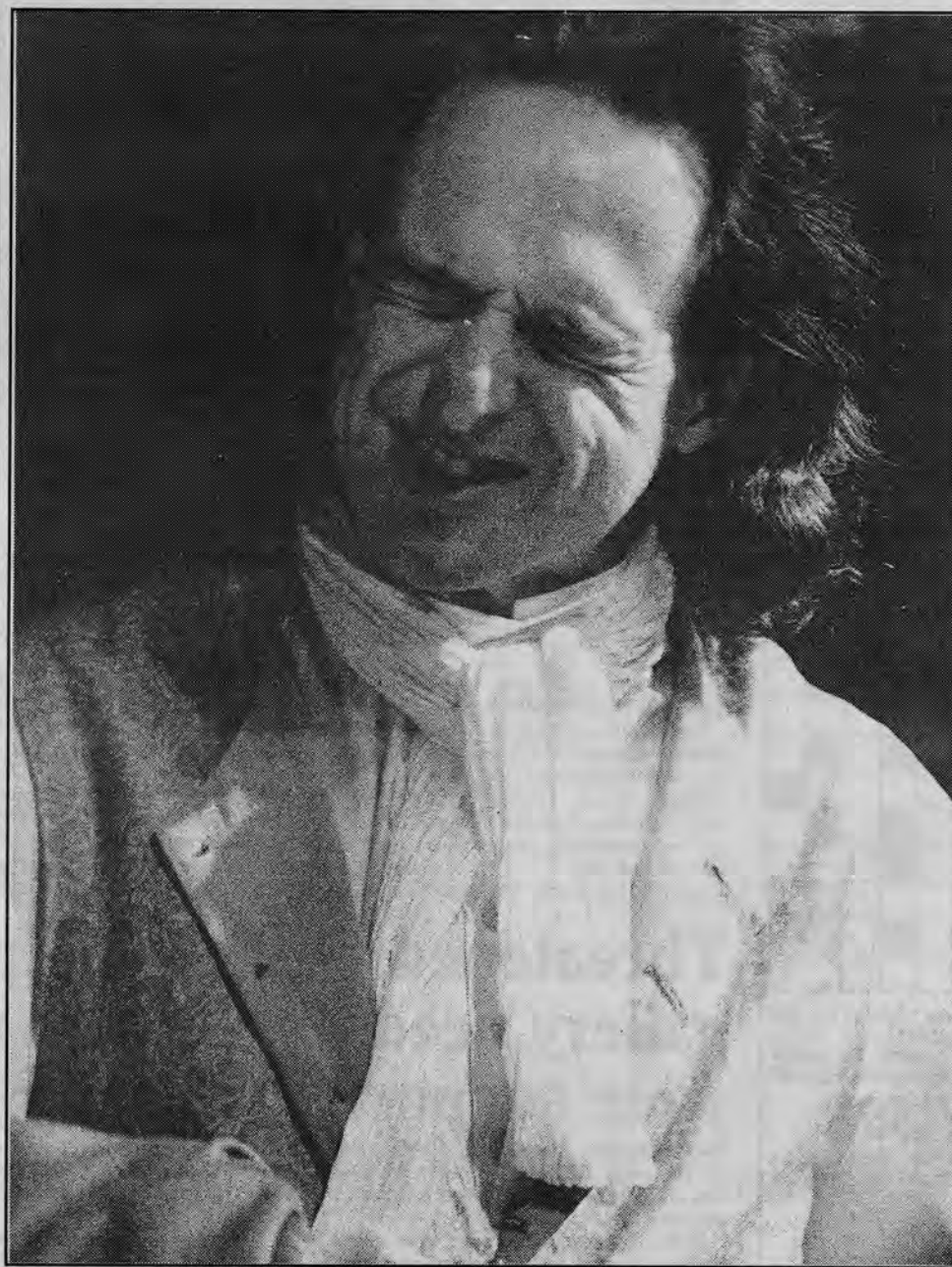
The production is aided by a most effective *trompe l'oeil* set, transforming the theatre into a neglected conservatory, full of dead plants and leaves, and a choked fountain. Effective lighting and sound effects take us from thunderstorm and rains to sunshine as the conservatory is prepared for summer and the misconceptions of the characters are cleared away.

Michael Sadler's translation of the play gives it plenty of energy, but some of the modern expressions - "hang on", "allergic to" - grate rather with the period setting.

The play is frequently very funny. The Marquis, desperate to pay the Countess a compliment, bursts out with "You're in such wonderful health!" and the Countess attacks a dead plant with some frenzied pruning when he confides that his main concern is to avoid paying Hortense the FF£200,000.

□ *The Will* is at the Greenwich Studio Theatre until March 25.

Love and money vie for ascendancy in marriage tale



Illona Linthwaite shines as the forthright Countess, blooming with awakening love. Julian Forsythe is equally charming as the dithering Marquis, so unsure of himself he cannot see the Countess' love. And Sallyanne Law brings a bright-eyed bounciness to her part playing Hortense.

*Julian Forsythe is the Marquis, dithering over his love for the Countess, in *The Will* currently being performed at the Greenwich Studio Theatre.*