



CLASSIC: Geraldine McEwan and Michael Hordern.

For the love of Lydia

by MILTON SHULMAN

ALTHOUGH *The Rivals*, by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, at the Olivier, is a comedy about the feuding between three men over the hand of a 17-year-old girl, it is the women who give this play its timeless appeal.

There is Lydia Languish, who is besieged by suitors because she is beautiful and so rich that she feeds her parrots on small pearls.

But Lydia (Anne Louise Lambert) is an independent spirit, determined to marry for love not money, whose romantic ideals have been inspired by the popular novels she gets from circulating libraries.

Mrs Malaprop is her aunt and one of the most amusing female characters in English drama. In her determination to prevent Lydia from throwing herself away on a poor ensign, she crucifies the English language in the name of humour.

Impatient in her efforts to find an elitist, longish word where a more humdrum would do, she can talk about someone being the pineapple of politeness, getting the hydrostatics or referring to an allegory on the banks of the Nile.

Miss Geraldine McEwan, uttering her carefully chosen linguistic distortions as if they were being delivered on a silver salver, gets a laugh out of almost every verbal aberration and is one of the best Mrs Malaprops I have ever seen.

Also making the men play second fiddle is Julia Melville, whose calm receptivity of the jealous tantrums of her fiancé, Faulkland (Edward Petherbridge), is graciously interpreted by Fiona Shaw.

But if the Sheridan classic gives women the best roles, they are coupled with some beautifully eccentric characters among the men.

The choleric Sir Anthony Absolute, demanding total obedience from his son, is brilliantly played by Michael Hordern as he blusters from one fit of red-faced pique to another.

The genial bumpkin, Bob Acres, who finds himself uncomfortably caught up in London ways, is congenially played by a grinning Tim Curry while Patrick Ryecart makes a romantic figure of swooping panache of Lydia's successful suitor.

John Gunter's delicious toy-town sets turn Bath into an intriguing picture of 18th century restful elegance, while Peter Wood's direction is a model of mannered movement that vindicates this play's reputation as one of the great comedies in the English language.

Rivals Shulman Standard



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