

## The Dispute, Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, Paris

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Published: February 4 2009 22:23 | Last updated: February 4 2009 22:23

This play was a flop squared when it premiered in 1744 and left the ageing Marivaux with more than a little egg on his face. If the basic battleground was pretty familiar – lovers arguing over which sex is least faithful – the plot was less palatable. Four children are reared away from any contact with society except two black servants, then thrown together as young adults while the voyeuristic lovers sit back and watch the fireworks. Cruel dissection replaced Marivaux's hallmark satire. The play gathered dust for two centuries.



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Minimalism meets baroque: 'The Dispute'

This production weaves the cruelty into a deceptively good-tempered web of contrasts. Minimalism meets baroque in Yves Bernard's ingenious set, a lofty wood-clad chamber of candlelit subterfuge that turns into a spotlight laboratory where decadent eyes gaze down on unfortunate specimens in sumptuous period costumes.

Muriel Mayette, *administrateur général* of the Comédie Française, directs with

clarity and conviction. Her treatment constantly pushes at extremes. Of silence and sound, with Arthur Besson's original music punctuating and interrupting the dialogue. Of movement, with the youngsters as marionettes whose teetering, mincing footwork betrays their disorientation. Of body language, each inhabited by different physical mannerisms in a nice nod to the effect of evolutionary isolation. Of size and sex, with the female servant engagingly played as an oversized earth mother by (male) Bakary Sangaré.

Some glorious performances ward off the winter gloom. Marie-Sophie Ferdane makes an impossibly sensual Hermiane, languidly commanding the stage, though Thierry Hancisse's Prince is more muffled and uneven in his narcissistic games. Anne Kessler's luminous Eglé makes you forget the actress is mature. All frills, bunches and doll-like precision, she carries us into the heart of her own disbelief and delight in discovering her own reflection and thus herself. Véronique Vella's Adine captures the hurt and bewilderment at the realisation of ugliness. Benjamin Jungers (Azor) and Stéphane Varupenne (Mesrin) bounce like jumping jacks in a rictus of excitement that cannot last.

We laugh a lot, but the inhumanity of the experiment is never forgotten. By the time Hermiane calls a halt, the quartet is writhing like moths trapped against the light.

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