

Lifestyle



Tuesday
Oct. 20, 1998

Elizabeth Via Brown 4D
Today's TV 5D
Coffee Break 6D

REVIEW

WANT TO GO?

- **What:** Tony Kushner's "The Illusion"
- **When:** Performances continue with 8 p.m. showings through Saturday
- **Where:** The Octagon Theatre at The Alabama Shakespeare Festival
- **Admission:** \$10 and \$12 with discounts for students and seniors
- **More information:** 271-5353

Fine acting, directing empower 'Illusion'

By Allan Swafford
Montgomery Advertiser

Pridamant of Avignon comes to the mysterious cave of the magician Alcandre in search of information about his son whom he drove from home 15 years before. Such is the premise, but hardly the heart, of Tony Kushner's "The Illusion," which vaguely has its genesis in Pierre Corneille's 1636 "The Theatrical Illusion."

In fact the Kushner paraphrase — it is neither a translation nor adaptation — owes little to its original, other than title, character names and some plot elements.

Kushner's purpose is a radical shift of interest from Corneille's apologia for the theater as art form. The modern writer lifts from the French master for the purpose of exploring the nature of illusion and reality in different aspects of love. As such Kushner's play attempts more than it accomplishes but is, nonetheless, an ironically pleasant, theatrical romp.

So what happens? Alcandre shows Pridamant three visions of his son. In each, the same individuals appear under different names and with personality changes. The son whose names are Calisto/Cilindor/Theogenes appears as the lover of Melibea/Isabelle/Hippolyta, but in each instance the quality of his love differs markedly and his motivation is left suspect.

The problem with Kushner's script, which is admittedly rife with cleverness, is summed up by one of his characters. Pridamant (doubtlessly speaking for the audience) says, "A man has a right to expect coherence." Unfortunately, to countenance this play we must adopt the position of Alcandre who replies, "I gave up expecting coherence years ago."

Still, despite the persistent sense of scriptive incoherence — and incohesiveness — this production works. The direction and the acting overcome the obstacles to a remarkable degree. We finally do not even resent the contrived surprise ending — the revelation of the nature of the three visions — without which the script would fail completely. This kind of trick went out with melodrama and is not really acceptable even in melodrama's descendant, murder mystery. It is only palatable here because of the charming life with which these actors imbue the characters and the subtle cadences of Henson Keys' direction.

Alvin Keith's Alcandre is a flamboyant showstopper. Noel Velez is a protean Calisto/Cilindor/Theogenes in a performance equaled by the variety of Tarah Flanagan's tripartite heroine. But the astonishing performance on this stage is Jennifer Thomas' maid, Elicia/Lyse/Clarina. She glows. She glitters. She is quicksilver. She is magic.