

ASF's 'The Illusion' a wonderful adaptation of the classic production

Theatre Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

Neo-classic tragedies such as Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid* (1637), see frequent revivals, even in translation, because they are usually based on classical or mythical stories that we are still more or less familiar with. The comedies are less frequently revived, as they are usually based on the pastoral tradition, now very much outmoded. Only in Shakespeare's hands as in "As You Like It," do we still tolerate this tradition.

So when Tony Kushner, the Tony and Pulitzer Prize winning American playwright, "freely adapted" one of Corneille's comedies, we hope he has managed to breathe new life into the old tradition, especially as he says "there

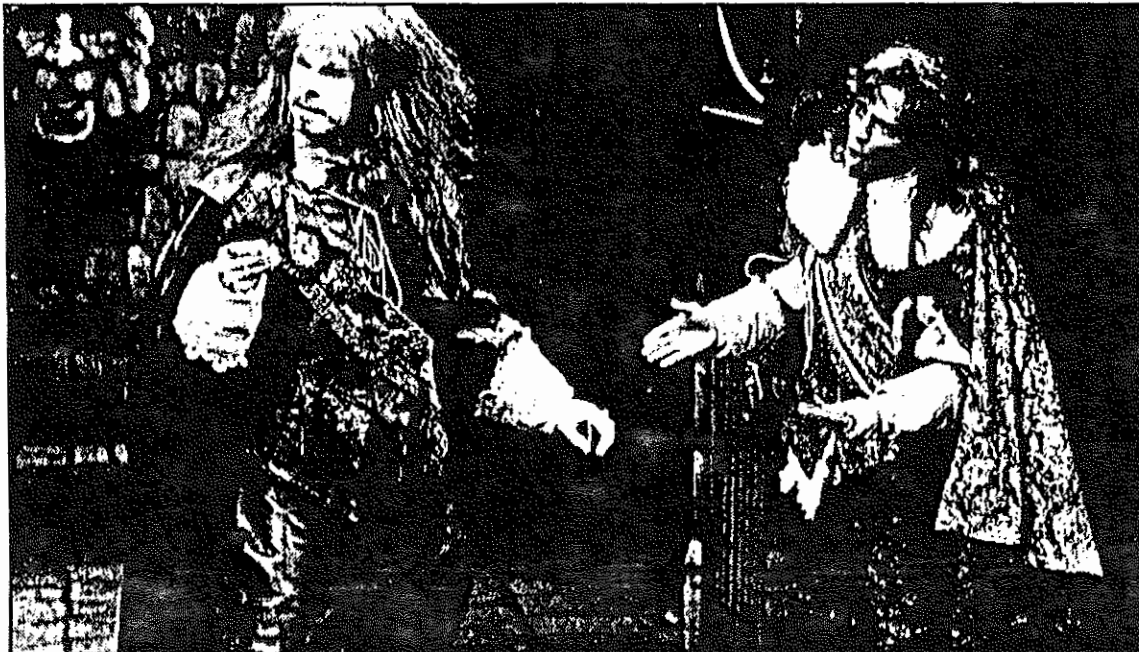
are virtually no lines directly translated from the French." Judge this rarity for yourself, through October 22, at Alabama Shakespeare Festival in the Graduate Company's production of *The Illusion*. Directed by Henson Keyes, whose work I've always admired in the past, the play is a vehicle for eight of the second-year, ASF graduate students.

The frame is clear. A father comes to a magician's cave to find the whereabouts of his son, who left home fifteen years earlier. The magician stages four playlets that show the son in various situations with other people. The playlets are talky and full of improbable characters. We, the audience, and the father assume these playlets are about the son's life — "A man has a right to expect some coherence" — but

the plays are actually only theatrical illusion, as we see at the end.

Unfortunately for the audience, this intentional lack of coherence makes our life difficult. Kushner has kept the original hard names, and each actor plays three or four different roles, while dressed in essentially the same costume. Most wear hats and wigs, disguising them further. A character leaves the frame to play in a playlet, but because of his disguise we don't realize who he is. I managed to follow the first couple of playlets, but the third and fourth seemed too much, and I lost interest. The play is too long by half.

Set designer Seay Erchart makes good use of the Octagon stage, with both an open space for the cave and an inner stage with curtain for the playlets. Having the



Matthew J. Cody and Noel Etienne Velez perform in the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's Graduate Production of *The Illusion*



Jennifer Thomas and Noel Etienne Velez perform in the ASF Graduate Production of *The Illusion*

Photo by ASF/Scarsbrook

father, the magician, and the servant stay on stage as viewers, who occasionally comment on or against the action, is an effective device. But why did I often feel I was at a children's theater with special effects. Danny Davidson's over blown costumes, and actors standing on platforms to make them giant-sized. Terry Cermak's lighting is dramatic. As a vehicle for the graduate students this was a great play but it

the audience.

The production, which I saw in preview, included Reese Philip Purser (as the father), Salvatore Giordano (excellent as a mute servant), Alvin J. Keith, Jr. (as the magician), Noel Velez (as the son), Tarah Flanagan (as his beloved), Jennifer Thomas (as a sassy servant), Timothy Tait (as another suitor), and Matthew J. Cody (as a lunatic).

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