

Tartuffe; Live Arts, in the DownStage Theater; Through May 23 **False piety goes down easy in Tartuffe**

by : Wistar Watts Murray

It is no accident that David Dwyer's set design for *Tartuffe* incorporates dramatic, gilded picture frames that stretch from the stage to the Live Arts balcony. Like the title character of Molière's play, the frames are attractive on the outside and empty on the inside. They are bloated, eye-grabbing symbols of hypocrisy, so it makes sense that Tartuffe should gesticulate in their figurative shadow.

Played by Chris Patrick (and the prosthetic beer belly under his costume), Tartuffe is delightfully unscrupulous in his pursuit of money, property and his benefactor Orgon's wife, all while pretending to be a pious friend of the family into which he's insinuated himself. The naïve Orgon (played by Adam Smith) buys the conman's act hook, line and sinker, which makes the entire household wild with anxiety. Fortunately, Orgon's maids and relations are wiser than he: They conspire to reveal the true nature of their unwanted guest before Tartuffe leads them all into ruin.

Richard Wilbur's modern translation of Molière's 17th-century French comedy is written in rhyming couplets—a challenge for actors who want to sound more conversational than singsong. But the clever script fell into capable hands: Directed by Betsy Rudelich Tucker, the actors deliver their lines quickly and naturalistically without sacrificing the rhythm of the dialogue. Actors Shawna Pledger (Dorine) and Daria Okugawa (Elmire) particularly shine in this regard.



'Tuffe love: Chris Patrick's titular terror tries to woo a reluctant (and married) Elmire (Daria Okugawa) in *Tartuffe* at Live Arts.

But the pace doesn't truly pick up until Tartuffe himself takes the stage in Act III, twirling his giant rosary beads and flirting coyly with Elmire. (One wonders why it took Molière so long to produce his star.) In this production, Chris Patrick takes full advantage of the play's comic possibilities. He flaunts leg in a knee sock, he nearly sheds his pants, he inhales the interior of a high-heeled shoe. He is a fast-talking, slapsticking predator whose physical movements seem to reflect his every sordid thought.

Oddly, Molière attributes Tartuffe's happy ending to Louis XIV, whose "one keen glance" penetrates Tartuffe's hypocrisy and saves the day. In this manner, Molière flatters his patron/sovereign by summoning him from the literary ether and making him the unlikely hero of his comedy. These final lines seem aimed at currying favor with the one person who could prevent Molière's play from being banned, a pretty "Tartuffian" move from a playwright who routinely satirized self-serving hypocrisy.