

Dangerous Liaisons - Bag&Baggage Productions 2012

Director's Notes - Patrick Spike

Context

Pierre-Ambroise-François Choderlos de Laclos was born in Amiens, France on October 18, 1741, to a respectable family. At age eighteen, he entered the military as an artilleryman and spent some twenty years in service. He wrote light verse and a comic opera produced in 1777, *Ernestine*. In 1779 he was sent to the island of Aix to supervise the construction of a fort. It was here that he composed *Dangerous Liaisons*. In 1781 he returned to Paris to supervise the printing and publication of his novel, which appeared in 1782 to great acclaim and scandal. In 1786 Laclos married Solanges Duperre, whom he had impregnated some two years earlier, and thus acted on better morals than those of most of his characters in *Dangerous Liaisons*. During the French Revolution, Laclos was imprisoned twice, though he was released on both occasions. In 1800 he joined Napoleon's army. He was killed in service in Italy in 1803. Any fame Laclos enjoys today is due entirely to *Dangerous Liaisons*, his one great, diabolic masterpiece. Readers will agree that, in this case, one is enough. Some readers might think one was, in fact, more than enough.

The epistolary novel grew in prominence throughout the 18th century until it finally arrived at the pen of Choderlos de Laclos. Richardson's *Clarissa* in England and Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in France, both epistolary novels, had been extremely well-received. Their themes of education, romance, and the definition of the female self were repeated in Laclos's own work, but with a twist. Laclos learned from the error of Richardson and Rousseau's ways in that he did not create a novel written from a single perspective, that and he did not use the letters of his *Dangerous Liaisons* solely to report the events of the novel. The diary-like epistles of *Clarissa* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse* certainly kept the plot moving along, but they were extremely flat. There seemed to be no motivation behind these letters. To combat this lack of depth, Laclos wrote a kind of drama in letters, where multiple personages vied and schemed with, and against, each other through what they wrote. It is the portrait of the end of an era, an extremely rarified society gasps its last breaths on the pages of *Dangerous Liaisons*. It is the most extreme kind of epistolary novel one can imagine, a novel that could not be written except in letters, and it seems the last possible book of its kind. Its plot and its characters so perfectly motivate its own form that the result is terrifying and seamless.

However, what is perhaps more important is that all this writing was going on against a background of a stirring revolution, or seven years before the beginning of the French Revolution. Written so close to a time of civil war, *Dangerous Liaisons* is itself extremely concerned with conflict and military strategy, even if only in the realm of romance and personal relationships. Choderlos himself was a military officer at the time of writing the novel. As a soldier, Choderlos was something of an outsider to the society he described. This was the society of the aristocracy, a society which, whether it knew it or not at the time, had its back up against the wall. Its excesses, monetary and otherwise, had progressed to the point where they could go no farther; fashion, no longer a pastime, had become a profession in itself.

The publication of *Dangerous Liaisons* produced a scandal, not only because it described the long success in society of two seemingly depraved individuals who lacked any trace of morals, but because it was seen as a roman à clef. This is to say that readers of *Dangerous Liaisons* claimed to be able to find certain keys in Choderlos de Laclos's descriptions of his personages which linked them to actual individuals in society. The preface to the novel that describes how the letters were taken from an actual correspondence did nothing to dispel this belief. It is interesting that the issue of authenticity or sincerity of intentions is so frequently in question in the novel, since its own authenticity was frequently the topic of discussion in Parisian society. One can only be sure that Laclos hoped to make a splash by writing a novel so clearly designed to titillate, amuse, and criticize.

Despite its banning in 1824, *Dangerous Liaisons* has risen through the ages as one of the most famous accounts in the French language of affairs of the heart. Though it is without a doubt the product of its time, produced by societal pressures, it is also an account of the limitations of inter-personal relationships that no one has yet managed to escape entirely.

Period & Social History

1780's just prior to the French Revolution

France in the Ancien Régime (the aristocratic, social and political system established in France from roughly the 15th to the 18th century) covered a territory of around 200,000 square miles (520,000 km²), and supported 22 million people in 1700. At least 96% of the population were peasants. France had the largest population in Europe. Very few women held any power—some queens did, as did the heads of Catholic convents.

In *The Enlightenment* the writings of philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau gave political program for reform of the ancien régime, founded on a reform of domestic mores. Rousseau's conception of the relations between private and public spheres is more unified than that found in modern sociology. Rousseau argued that the domestic role of women is a structural precondition for a "modern" society.

Downfall

Main article: Causes of the French Revolution

In 1789, the Ancien Regime was violently overthrown by the French Revolution. Although France in 1785 faced economic difficulties, mostly concerning the equitability of taxation, it was one of the richest and most powerful nations of Europe.[17] The French people also enjoyed more political freedom and a lower incidence of arbitrary punishment than any of their fellow Europeans. However, Louis XVI, his ministers, and the widespread French nobility had become immensely unpopular. This was a consequence of the fact that peasants and, to a lesser extent, the bourgeoisie, were burdened with ruinously high taxes levied to support wealthy aristocrats and their sumptuous, often gluttonous, lifestyles.[18]

The fall of the ancien régime in France may be blamed, in part, on its own rigidity. Aristocrats were confronted by the rising ambitions of the merchants, tradesmen and prosperous farmers, who were allied with aggrieved peasants, wage-earners and intellectuals influenced by the ideas of Enlightenment philosophers. As the revolution proceeded, power devolved from the monarchy and the privileged-by-birth to more-representative political bodies, like legislative assemblies, but conflicts among the formerly allied republican groups became the source of considerable discord and bloodshed.

A growing number of the French citizenry had absorbed the ideas of "equality" and "freedom of the individual" as presented by Voltaire, Denis Diderot, Turgot, and other philosophers and social theorists of the Enlightenment. The American Revolution demonstrated that it was plausible for Enlightenment ideas about how a government should be organized could actually be put into practice. Some American diplomats, like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, had lived in Paris where they consorted freely with members of the French intellectual class. Furthermore, contact between American revolutionaries and the French troops who served as anti-British mercenaries in North America helped spread revolutionary ideals to the French people. After a time, many of the French began to attack the undemocratic nature of their own government, push for freedom of speech, challenge the Roman Catholic Church, and decry the prerogatives of the nobles.[19]

Revolution was not due to a single event but to a series of events, that together irreversibly changed the organization of political power, the nature of society, and the exercise of individual freedoms.

Nostalgia

For some observers the term (ancien regime) came to denote a certain nostalgia. Talleyrand famously quipped: "Celui qui n'a pas vécu au dix-huitième siècle avant la Révolution ne connaît pas la douceur de vivre[20]: ("Those who have not lived in the eighteenth century before the Revolution do not know the sweetness of living")"

The reason for this affection was the perceived decline in culture and values following the Revolution, where the aristocracy lost much of its economic and political power to what was seen as a rich, but coarse and materialistic bourgeoisie. The theme recurs throughout nineteenth-century French literature, with Balzac and Flaubert alike attacking the mores of the new upper classes. To this mindset, the Ancien Régime expressed a bygone era of refinement and grace, before the Revolution and its associated changes disrupted the aristocratic tradition and ushered in a crude, uncertain modernity. The historian Alexis de Tocqueville argued against this defining narrative in his classic study, highlighting the continuities between pre- and post- revolutionary French institutions.

Summary from the novel

In a pair of sumptuous drawingrooms, one in a Parisian mansion, the other in a chateau on a luxurious estate in the countryside surrounding Paris, two aristocrats are very bored. The Marquise de Merteuil decides, therefore, to construct a little intrigue for her own amusement and the amusement of her former lover, the Vicomte de Valmont. The Marquise is aware that a young girl of good family, Cécile Volanges, has only just left the convent so that she can be married to the Comte de Gercourt. Now, the Marquise has a bone to pick with this particular Comte, and so she suggests to the Vicomte that he seduce and debauch Cécile to create a scandal and humiliate Gercourt. Valmont accepts the Marquise's proposal somewhat coolly, since he already has his eyes on another prey, the highly religious Présidente de Tourvel, the chaste wife of a member of Parliament. But, never one to refuse a challenge, Valmont suggests that he and the Marquise enter into a slightly different bet: if he can obtain written proof that he has slept with the Présidente, the Marquise must yield herself to him.

Meanwhile, Cécile has been presented to society, and in society she meets the charming and gentle Chevalier Danceny. Danceny becomes Cécile's music teacher and slowly, with a little coaxing from the Marquise de Merteuil, the two young people fall in love. During this time, Valmont is out in the country on his aunt's estate, trying to turn the Présidente de Tourvel's head. He has very little luck in this department despite his use of every known trick in the book. Then, as coincidence would have, Cécile's mother, Madame Volanges, who corresponds regularly with the Présidente de Tourvel, happens to say some rather unflattering things about Valmont in a letter which Valmont just happens to steal and read. And thus it is that Valmont resolves to seduce the little Volanges as revenge for her mother's only too accurate trash-talk.

Cécile's "seduction" would be more accurately termed "rape," but the girl is persuaded to enter into a bizarre student-teacher relationship with Valmont, so that for a while she is being courted by Danceny and "loved" nightly by Valmont. During his time as Cécile's teacher, Valmont is also able to win the heart of the Présidente de Tourvel.

However, the Marquise de Merteuil is not so easily pleased. Rather than encourage the Vicomte de Valmont to meet the conditions of their original agreement, she mocks him for having fallen in love with the Présidente de Tourvel. Valmont's pride does not withstand these attacks very well, and to avoid compromising his reputation as a good-for-nothing gigolo, he leaves the Présidente cold, with no explanation. Cécile fares no better, after a particularly rough night in Valmont's room, she miscarries his child.

Now things are really looking bad for everyone involved. The Présidente de Tourvel removes herself to a convent where she proceeds to die of grief and shame. Merteuil and Valmont are never able to reconcile their little snit and can only agree to go to war with one another. Danceny learns that Valmont seduced Cécile and challenges him to a duel; and Danceny wins the duel. Valmont hands over his correspondence with the Marquise to Danceny on his deathbed; all of society learns of her schemes and machinations. The Marquise is forced to flee town and, like a wicked old witch, is never heard from again. Full of regret for her activities with Valmont, Cécile returns to the convent from whence she came, with the intention of becoming a nun.

For a funny boiled down summary of the book, letter by letter, see

Contemporary Connections

1780's France

1. Era of Ancien régime - huge division between the Aristocracy and the lower class masses (96% peasants).
2. Aristocracy represents only a small portion of the population, holding all the wealth, wielding power, dictating policy, and toying with others due to their complete lack of focus on needs. This led shortly thereafter to the French revolution (1789) where the masses rose up to topple the aristocracy and their power.
3. Fashion of the aristocracy was lavish, exaggerated silhouette with integrated statements of power

1980's US

1. a period of political confidence that led to bold experimentation of personal image, fashion, music, art... led to movements in punk rock and new wave, androgyny, sexual liberation
2. the experimental abandon crashed down with a huge and fast pendulum swing back into conservatism resulting from lost confidence in our leaders, the nations spiraling debt and financial system, AIDS.
3. The hopeful financial theory of "trickle down economics" gave a hope that the money channeled to the wealthy would work its way down to the masses... unfortunately this never worked which led to much unrest between the masses and the wealthy few/elite

Present US

1. We are in the aftermath of a period of prosperity, (Clinton years) that swung back into conservatism (Bush years).
2. We are seeing develop a bigger and bigger gap between the wealthy and powerful, and the masses (the 99%).
3. The masses are starting to express more and more loudly their dissatisfaction, and the wealthy and powerful are displaying a playful abandon in wielding their power.

Concepts

Snare, trap

Manipulation - through language, action, affection, sex

DL is in many ways a story about what people say to each other:

Verbal combat - winners and losers

Language as weapon - cuts, wounds

Language taken at surface value, even when deceit is commonplace... intriguing how their words must be dealt with... even when manipulation and/or deceit is assumed or known - much more value/trust/weight placed in verbal communication than is typical today

Sex as a means of control

Sex as weapon

Sex as conquest

Sex as gamesmanship

Metaphor: Sex as War

For these players, mere pleasure -- physical pleasure, that is -- is the slightest of motives. Sex -- and its paltry adjunct, love -- is unworthy of these aristocratic combatants; they're beneath them, prosaic, common. For Valmont and the Marquise, **victory is the ultimate pleasure -- the only pleasure.** (Washington Post review)

Love is confused with war, with religion and with illness. Various characters use these as metaphors for love. Which metaphor each character tends to use the most can tell us something about them.

Questions

Language:

Are there times when what is unsaid seems more important to you than what is said? Where are there moments of silence? Or, where is something left unsaid? How is silence expressed? What are the different ways each uses language to get what he or she wants?

Men's and Women's roles:

Is one sex portrayed as more powerful or more skillful than the other? Do women use different techniques to get what they want than men, and vice versa? Which aspects of their language, if any, seem particularly masculine or particularly feminine to you. What are the different ways each uses language to get what he or she wants?

Themes

Desire - "Desire is not only the motivating force in *Dangerous Liaisons*, it is itself the most desired commodity. In a society where people live in such luxury that they can want for nothing, the very act of wanting something makes that commodity become valuable."

War - battle is the metaphor constantly used by Merteuil and Valmont to describe their amorous exploits.

Religion - metaphor used to describe love, employed in particular by Valmont

Education - "receiving an education" usually refers to a loss of innocence. Merteuil's frequent referral to the seduction of Cécile as the girl's education. Cécile's anatomy lessons

Motifs

The Opera - Opera held an important place in daily life in the 18th century. Here, the opera is present beneath the form of a metaphor. Referenced more directly and with more metaphor in the novel.

Class - Servants know everything that goes on in the house where they serve, and yet this knowledge seldom seems to work to their advantage. The aristocracy's mission to make dependency a one-way street, since it has all the power and the lower classes depend on it, seems to be failing when it comes to the middle class.

Illness and Medicine - The suggestion that love is a sickness proves so convincing that soon Tourvel will indeed die of love for Valmont. What Valmont sought to describe as a kind of religious devotion or sacrifice, Madame de Rosemonde wishes Tourvel to view as an indisposition. In fact, Valmont himself claimed to be indisposed when the Présidente refused to see him or accept his love. **Illness is also the final punishment of the Marquise de Merteuil. As certain witty members of society remark, sickness reveals the true ugliness of the Marquise's soul.** (novel)

Symbols

The Letter -

The Key -

Audience Experience

"The sense of [the audience] complicity in Merteuil and Valmont's exploits is what makes it such a delectably naughty experience.

"The audience cannot feel far off, detached. They must feel like they are in the room with the characters... a sense of immediacy is called for.

"What happens for the [the audience] is mirrored in the changes in the characters. What began as an delicious amusement deepens into a tragedy. The richness at the end isn't quite what was expected at the beginning when we admired the talcum lightness of the characters. The passion, for us and for them, comes as a surprise. For them it's cataclysmic; for us, it's divine." (Washington Post review)

Acting Considerations:

Now that we know the historical context for the play, we know how the mistakes of the era have been repeated throughout history in various nations including our own, and all this gives a rich foundation for the lasting passion for this piece and is cause to the many versions that have been created over the years for stage, film and television...

We need to take all that in, but ultimately ignore it for purposes of PLAYING the story and these characters.

Ultimately we have a delicious, vicious tale of corruption, greed, power plays, sexual exploits, filled with some of the most memorable characters in literature, fighting, clawing, manipulating and dissecting each other with their words and their actions. That's what we're going to put on stage.

We'll start with one on one meetings between each actor and the director to discuss the questions I sent you, which are... (see question sheet), and we will want to clearly define their intentions, their motivations, their secrets, their tactics, and their opinions and relationships with the others. And I DO NOT want you to share these details with your fellow actors.

This is story largely about characters with secrets, that they hide, hold onto, and use as weapons, from an era where secrets were respectfully acknowledged and regarded as personal and acceptable. This is key to understanding the characters, their situations, and the world in which they lived.

Costume Considerations

Costumes will consist primarily of lounge wear with a formalized edge. Some bodice pieces, perhaps some hip enhancements for women. Silky robes, etc.

Period of costume will be 1780's meets 1980's... imagine what Crystal Carrington (Dynasty) might have worn to breakfast on the patio. The silhouette of the era was repeated in various times in history... we'll blend them.

Small costume changes to establish new scene, or for the scene itself, removal or loosening of blouse or shirt, etc. Actors able to do this when slipping behind a set piece, or while in transition between scenes in view of the audience - smooth, effortless.

Hair will be formalized and stylized to suggest the shape and size of the period, without actually going for powdered wigs, etc.

Set considerations

The playing area elevated, it is Merteuil and Valmont's "game board", later their battlefield

Actors enter the scene by stepping onto the area, exit by stepping off

Actors not in the scene seated/standing around the playing area, maybe one step lower, watching, observing, voyeuristically. Some even with opera glasses to magnify what they are watching. They represent society at large, watching.

Will need a piece that can function as a bed in certain scenes - preferably a chaise at the downstage end of the thrust out into the audience, possible a settee, chairs occasional tables, game table

pieces above also needed for actors to slip behind for small costume changes and then be revealed as they enter, etc.

sent to gregory 7/12/11:

- 1) All actors on stage through entire show
- 2) Playing area on the stage and a thrust out into audience, somewhat like a narrow runway with a play area at the end of it...
- 3) Playing area elevated a step, with surrounding area on stage down a step where chairs will surround for the actors to sit when not IN the scene. From there they will watch, observe, judge... some with opera glasses, fans to hide behind, etc... peaking, glancing
- 4) stage area maybe has a settee, a chair, a writing desk... the end of the runway has a chaise that also can be used for a bed
- 5) Some device on the stage to change the setting symbolically, hanging panels that turn around, curtains that open or close... ideas?

Some examples of Paris Hotels of the period:

http://books.google.com/books?id=EstKYtJpOK0C&pg=PA229&lpg=PA229&dq=1780's+paris+hotel+address+example&source=bl&ots=0oPBAU_Id2&sig=A6Ek5IY-58KKRMpYfzydhXQUS3U&hl=en&sa=X&ei=DJd2T62jFcWdiAKH5rmnDg&ved=0CEgQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=1780's%20paris%20hotel%20address%20example&f=false

Page 233-234 Hotel de Gallifet - example of where Merteuil might have resided
page 231 the Hotel de Montholon - example of where Tourvel might have lived
page 230 - Hotel de Salm - example of where Valmont might have lived.

Another possible example for the Marquise:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hôtel_de_Mademoiselle_de_Condé

Lighting Considerations

3 chandeliers lit individually. 3 primary playing spaces, plus center triangle and likely some specials. Isolating the action so that we can light other actors watching as scenery, separating them from the scene.

Sound Considerations

Voiceovers with actors reading snippets of letters in french and english, overlapping. Top of show Merteuil enters with stack of letters and as she opens/reads them actors drift in as voiceover starts in french then gradually transitions to english. May do similar during scene transitions.

Words

Pronunciation tool: <http://virtualfrenchtutor.com/site.php/spgs/read/frenchg/>

Comte [kawnt] - Count

marquise [mar-KEEZ] - the wife or widow of a marquis, a lady holding the rank equal to that of a marquis.

Présidente - spouse of a Président

Vicomte [vee-KAWnt] - a French noble holding a rank corresponding to that of a British viscount or viscountess

epistolary [ih-PIS-tl-er-ee]