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Review: Chasing ‘The Rivals’ on a Summer Evening

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“Quickly, quickly, now,” a servant in breeches and waistcoat urged, shooing the audience down a slope of lawn and onto a curving lamplit path to the duel. “Who lives, who dies — we’ll all find out!”

Dusk had fallen in the nearly two hours we’d spent chasing a roving production of “The Rivals” around the tree-lined edges of a pond in the northern reaches of Central Park. Now for the final scene. The suspense pulling me forward, though, had not much to do with [Richard Brinsley Sheridan](#)’s 18th-century play, a lighthearted comedy of manners that (no spoiler) does not end with a pile of dead bodies on the stage.

But I did want to know where the herd of us — grown-ups of all ages, small children toting stuffed animals, the occasional well-behaved dog — would alight to watch the last bit of this free production by [New York Classical Theater](#). This lush and tranquil pocket of the park, off West 103rd Street, is one of those places in the city that seem deliciously like a secret even though they’re not. On a balmy summer evening with a breeze to keep the bugs away, it’s perfectly enchanting. Two thumbs way up, then, for the scenic designers [Calvert Vaux](#) and [Frederick Law Olmsted](#).

With a cast of 10 directed by Stephen Burdman, the show itself is less successful. Slimmed down for speed, the script sacrifices depth and clarity and with them some comedy.



“The Rivals” is the Brinsley play that gave the world Mrs. Malaprop, the character whose reliably errant instinct for language inspired the word “malapropism.” But the play is mainly about two pairs of young lovers. Mrs. Malaprop’s niece, the rebellious Lydia Languish (Kristen Calgaro), has romantic fantasies of marrying scandalously and sacrificing her fortune in the process. She believes she is smitten with a poor man named Beverley, who is really the rich dissembler Jack Absolute (Michael Sweeney Hammond). Lydia’s friend Julia (Connie Castanzo), meanwhile, is engaged to Jack’s friend Faulkland (David Friedlander), whose deranged insecurity makes him question Julia’s devotion at every turn.

The performance over all lacks vitality, with the sputtering, brooding Faulkland the only character who seems flesh and blood. He's delightful to watch: ridiculous and surprisingly sympathetic. Others have their moments, but the moments don't cohere.

Remarkably, though, the company triumphs over the considerable acoustical challenges of performing outdoors in Manhattan. "A veritable cornucopia of discordant sounds," Mrs. Malaprop (Barbara Kingsley) said after a longish pause to let some screaming sirens pass, whereupon a helicopter flew over. Yet the dialogue, which the actors generally directed toward the audience rather than one another, was to my ear audible at all times. Next week, when the production moves to Battery Park City, performances will stay in one spot rather than roam, which may help with that site's [problematic sound](#).

There is something moving about the communal nature of this kind of production, open to anyone who happens by — like the three bike-riding boys, on the cusp of adolescence, who joined the crowd for a chunk of Act IV. As for the duck who quacked loudly through a romantic reunion in the final scene? Hey, it's her park, too.