

'Dangerous Liaisons' delightfully links sex and intrigue

By **RICHARD SMITH**
Staff Writer

When it comes to sexual intrigue, the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont are undisputed experts, and as ex-lovers they have a certain mutual respect for each other's cunning and guile. They know how to play the game, and find the decadence of 18th century pre-Revolution France the most accommodating of arenas in which to perform. That is, until they decide to play the game together.

On paper Stephen Frears might seem an odd choice to direct **Dangerous Liaisons**, the film based on Christopher Hampton's highly acclaimed Broadway play. Frears, the director of such singular and controversial works as "My Beautiful Laundrette," "Prick Up Your Ears" and "Sammy and Rosie Get Laid," may have proved himself to be well-versed in matters of sex and gratuity, but his previous films were primarily political in nature, displaying a fascination for the turbulent social changes occurring in Britain's '60s and Thatcherite '80s.

However, "Dangerous Liaisons," costume drama though it may appear, is as contemporary a film as any of the others. Betrayal, or cruelty — "it has a nobler ring to it" — is not, as we all know, an exclusively 18th century phenomenon, and "Dangerous Liaisons" quickly reveals itself not to be a mere saga of seductions but a full-blooded, no-holds-barred exploration into the sexual psyche. Its high theatricality, sometimes bordering on farce, belies a bitter, angry heart. Frears is not only suitable for this, he's downright perfect, and translates Hampton's deliciously clever script to the screen with every scratch, bite and sting intact.

The story is at once absorbing: Merteuil (Glenn Close) wants to exact revenge on a lover who has

left her to marry a young virgin, Cecile, and so she asks her ex-lover Valmont (John Malkovich) if he would perform the necessary spoiling. Valmont declines on the grounds that it would be too easy ("She'd be on her back before I even gave her the flowers," he says), and that in any case he is currently engaged in his most prestigious conquest to date, the seduction of a married woman renowned for her virtue, Madame de Tourvel (Michelle Pfeiffer). Merteuil is more intrigued by Valmont's self-set task than disappointed in his unavailability, and promises him a night of love if he succeeds in his plans and can provide written proof of his conquest.

Merteuil, however, still manages to plant the virginal Cecile in the path of Valmont's insatiable appetite for seduction, and her young beauty provides a pleasurable prelude ("a clearing of the throat") to Valmont's triumphant winning of the previously untouchable Tourvel. His victory, however, does not bring the promised reward, only unexpected complications: he begins to fall in love, a situation that the malevolent Merteuil cannot accept. It transpires that she and Valmont are playing the same game but by a slightly different set of rules. Thus the treachery and deception escalate until, masks stripped, emotions erupt with unprecedented ferocity and tragic results for all.

It's an understatement to say that the actors thrive on this material. With the exception of Pfeiffer, they were selected for their experience in theater, since Frears felt them to be more ably suited to the rich language of Hampton's script.

Glenn Close gives the performance of her career. It's her second successive role as villainess, though the conniving Merteuil is simply in a different league than



Glenn Close (as the scheming Marquise de Merteuil) and John Malkovich (as the aristocratic rogue the Vicomte de Valmont) star as ex-lovers playing a deadly game of sexual intrigue in Stephen Frears' film "Dangerous Liaisons."

we-all-know-who. Close's eerie control reveals an unsettling intelligence in Merteuil's manipulations: "Women are obliged to be more skillful than men. (Men) can destroy us with a few well-chosen words..." Merteuil has made deceit her lifelong pleasure, and it's a game she plays to win. Her rage in failure is as heart-stopping a scene as one is ever likely to see.

Malkovich has exactly the right air of mischief. He convinces us that his indiscretions are his only possible source of interest, the only way for him to be conducting himself, a feeling echoed by Cecile when she confesses her loss of innocence to Merteuil ("He has a way of putting things"). But Valmont is ensnared by his own sport, an event that Malkovich

portrays almost in delirium.

And Pfeiffer has never been so impressive. Valmont's destruction of her quiet, honorable beauty is nothing short of brutal. She is petrified by him and it is terrifying to watch.

The three leads are impeccably supported by Swozie Kurtz as Cecile's mother and Keanu Reeves as Cecile's well-meaning suitor. Particularly of note are the performances of Mildred Natwick, Valmont's wonderfully wise aunt, and the 18-year-old Uma Thurman as the enlightened Cecile.

In the hands of Frears, "Dangerous Liaisons" is a devastating social commentary, its theme not only timeless but searingly relevant. Despite the glorious backdrop of the French chateaux and James

Acheson's magnificent costumes, Frears is not the sort to stand back and gawp, but shoots straight to the heart of it. The camera never leaves this tight, complex world of infidelities. Frears explores the subject to its very depths, luring us in with clever, comedic twists until we can only stare at the consequences of such all-consuming decadence. It's easy to see a blueprint for revolution in all of this. In this sense, the film is as apocalyptic as any Frears has made, and all the more accomplished for utilizing Philippe Rousselot's superb cinematography.

"Dangerous Liaisons" delights, shocks and ultimately disturbs. If the Academy has guts (and it's going to need them), the film should stand tall on Oscar night.

There's something funny going on at the Omni Europa Hotel

By **PAUL STEWART**
Staff Writer

"Something familiar. Something peculiar. Something for everyone. A comedy tonight."

Charlie Goodnight's Comedy Zone in Chapel Hill's Omni Europa Hotel was host to a trio of stand-up comics Saturday night whose acts ranged from slightly humorous to downright funny, but never boring.

Master of ceremonies Bernie Lubbers was the first comedian. Throughout his two short acts, Lubbers was never really able to establish a good rapport with the audience. His act dragged at times, even though some of his material was funny and even clean, which says a lot in today's comedy circuit.

North Carolina native Sarah Helms, who can be described as a

redneck Roseanne Barr, was up second. She trudged through a good amount of sex and my-husband-was-a-this-and-that jokes to the point where she was almost predictable. Funny, but predictable. When she spoke of the trials and tribulations of womanhood, women in the audience laughed and nodded their heads in agreement.

The third comedian was impressionist Bill Secra, who has been performing since he was 15.

"It's all I know," said Secra.

In 1975, Secra said he was in a Louisville bar, watching a man named Texas Todd perform rope tricks, when he stepped on the stage for the first time. The crowd loved him and he was hired on the spot with Texas Todd cursing him out and walking away.

Since then he has appeared at clubs across the country, such as the Improv in Los Angeles and Dangerfield's in New York, and has worked with many comedians including Rodney Dangerfield himself.

Coming off a bad show in Rocky Mount ("It was my worst crowd"), Secra gave his secret to a successful show.

"You have to grab them in the first minute," Secra said.

And though it was not a bear hug, Secra successfully grabbed the audience that night.

Opening with an Edith and Archie Bunker impression, Secra had the crowd rolling with laughter. He then lapsed into an impression of Uncle Charlie from the TV program, "My Three Sons."

A problem with impressions

that Secra says he discovered early is finding material that hasn't been well-covered by other comics.

For instance, we have all heard Tattoo (from Fantasy Island) and John Wayne impressions many times. However, Secra's Wayne impression was in the context of a drug deal between Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Mr. Rogers and Slim Pickens and was hilarious (imagine Jimmy Stewart smoking a joint).

He continued these impressions, covering about 50 characters in a 30-minute period. Notable moments were his Jack Nicholson impression, his George Schultz as Droopy Dog and his Don Rickles in Ethiopia.

As with Lubbers, Secra's rapport with the audience was weak. However, his problem stemmed

from audience requests. Secra asked the audience for requests and they responded with many. Secra waited for the requests that he knew how to do, there was no improvisation in his act.

Secra closed the show with an act he referred to as The Answer Baby. This consisted of a baby doll sitting on his lap with a cigarette in its hand answering questions from the audience. Though he was able to pull it off, it was weak. He reverted to many vulgar jokes and ignored the audience when he was unable to give a quick response.

I once heard a movie critic comment that the worst crime a movie can commit is boring the audience. The same can be said of comedians. Even though their acts sometimes lagged, Lubbers, Helms and Secra could never be found guilty of that.