The Lady's Not for Burning' successfully combines romance, melancholy to create poetic drama

By Jeffrey Bivens
Guest Reviewer

One may initially have trouble in finding a plot in the current production of the comedy "The Lady's Not for Burning," by Christopher Fry. In fact, the story isn't fully realized until the second of the play's three acts. However, the plot seemingly carries less weight than the play's final message, which suggests that—yes—"love will find a way."

Set in the medieval town of Cool Cary, "Lady's" comes to this comedy through a series of sometimes-melancholic, sometimes-comical scenes that are framed by the medieval practice of witch-burning, where the play gets its title.

The "lady" of the title is Jennet Jourdenayne (Amy Harmon), a young, beautiful, unfortunate pursued by an angry mob that accuses her of being a witch. She takes shelter in the house of the town's nervous and perpetually sniffing mayor (Brian Pate), where a discharged soldier, Thomas Mendip (Ted Lane), has oddly come to ask for his own execution. This is the essential irony—that one character begs the mayor for her life while the other insists that he be put to death. And Fry delivers what the rising action promises: an optimistic conclusion in which the two characters are inevitably bound together in love, a conclusion answering that "to be" is far better than "not to be," that the lady is indeed not for burning—she is for loving.

Adding to this theme is the romance of another couple—Richard and Alizon (Doug Kisgen and Ann Marie Walker)—and the comical strife between the mayor's two nephews (Doug Hayko and Craig Jones), dominated by Hayko's perfectly childish antics. Rounding out the story is the key character of Matthew Skipp, played to drunken perfection by Brian Kokensparger, who is unfortunately not seen until the very end of the play.

Written in 1947 and staged here by Creighton's Bill Hutson, "Lady's" is a fine example of modern poetic drama—for which Fry and his contemporary T.S. Eliot are known—and its rhythm is captured admirably by the cast. However, the larger ensemble scenes are more effective than the duets and quartets; some of the two-person dialogues are awkward and even disappointing. Perhaps this is only to be expected, since most of the excitement and plot movement in Fry's play occurs in the group scenes.

At any rate, these group scenes are staged and performed remarkably well. Frequent entrances and exits are made smoothly, despite the sometimes crowded stage, and the cast is often moved into ever-changing tableaus that complement Tim Combs' wonderfully detailed set and ultimately give the audience some visual variance.

The Lady's Not for Burning runs tonight through Sunday and again November 15-18. Tickets are $5 for the general public and $3 for students and senior citizens.