# Wren Theatre’s stripped-back Dangerous Liaisons exposes timeless power and intimacy games



In an era dominated by digital subterfuge and emotional detachment, Wren Theatre's ambitious production of "Dangerous Liaisons" offers a refreshing and provocative lens through which to view the darker aspects of human connection. Under the direction of Tatum Lee, this latest adaptation of Christopher Hampton’s 1985 interpretation of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's 1782 novel immerses the audience in a world where intimacy is weaponised among the 18th-century French aristocracy. The performance, currently showing at the Annex Theatre, reimagines the stage into a “deadly playground” where seduction serves as both a sport and a survival mechanism.

At its core, "Dangerous Liaisons" intricately unravels a tale of power, revenge, and moral decay, following the nefarious exploits of the Marquise de Merteuil and her former lover, the Vicomte de Valmont. They engage in a manipulative wager, targeting the virtuous Madame de Tourvel and the innocent Cécile de Volanges, only to lead them into a trap of emotional and moral destruction. This play, steeped in the excesses of pre-Revolutionary France, resonates deeply with present-day themes of exploitation and relational transactions, particularly as societal norms around intimacy continue to shift alongside technological advancements.

Lee employs minimalist staging to great effect, illustrating that less can be indeed more, even in a world known for its opulence. With a sparse set featuring only a gilt chaise longue and a chair, complemented by strategically placed neoclassical paintings, the focus remains on the electric interactions between characters. The architecture of the Annex Theatre further enhances the atmosphere of deception and intrigue, allowing quick entrances and exits that mirror the characters' duplicitous natures. This dynamic staging, combined with inventive use of lighting, draws audiences closer to the characters’ emotional tumult, a technique reminiscent of other recent adaptations which have experimented with varying degrees of intimacy and theatrical artifice.

The performances within this production are particularly noteworthy. Jesse McQueen’s portrayal of the Marquise de Merteuil is compelling; she exudes lethal charm and wit while revealing the depths of her character's moral depravity. Her solitary spotlight during a poignant monologue powerfully underscores the profound disconnect within her quest for personal empowerment through manipulation. Meanwhile, Devin Bell as Valmont becomes a study in contradictions; his languorous exterior cloaks an insatiable hunger that resonates powerfully with the audience, particularly in scenes shared with McQueen that crackle with palpable chemistry.

Supporting performances, such as Lizette Mynhardt’s heart-wrenching rendition of Madame de Tourvel, and Katelyn Doyle’s transformative depiction of Cécile, enrich the portrayal of complex emotional landscapes. The character Chevalier Danceny, played by Lucas Blakely, provides a mix of uplift and vulnerability, revealing the cascading consequences of being caught in the machinations of Merteuil and Valmont. Intimacy Director Lizzie Moffatt deserves special mention for her adept choreography, which ranges from comedic interactions to sultry encounters, each accentuating the shifting power dynamics within the aristocratic milieu.

Critics of earlier adaptations have often noted challenges when translating Laclos’s intricate epistolary narrative to the stage or other mediums. For instance, the Queensland Ballet's 2019 ballet rendition drew attention for its explicit portrayals but struggled with maintaining the depth of characterisation (despite vibrant choreography). Similarly, other productions have wrestled with successfully conveying the plot's complexities amidst the dynamism of dance or vocal narration. Wren Theatre’s interpretation, however, remarkably sidesteps these pitfalls by leaning on the raw, verbal exchanges that breathe life into the characters’ motivations.

As the audience observes these aristocrats indulge in their treacherous games — seemingly unaware of the encroaching French Revolution — it becomes clear that the production echoes contemporary societal concerns. The parallels between the manipulating elite in the play and modern-day figures are striking, prompting reflection on current issues such as wealth disparity, the commodification of relationships, and the sometimes superficial connections fostered by social media and artificial intelligence.

In all its brutal beauty, Wren Theatre’s "Dangerous Liaisons" invites both a sense of nostalgia for a bygone era and a chilling reflection of present realities. As the final curtain falls on this powerful examination of power dynamics and moral depravity, audiences are left to ponder the costs associated with conflating intimacy with conquest. This production runs until June 7 and promises an experience that is not only theatrical but uncomfortably relevant.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.sesayarts.com/review-wren-theatre-strips-it-down-for-a-sensational-dangerous-liaisons/), [[2]](https://www.wrentheatre.com/lesliaisons)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.sesayarts.com/review-wren-theatre-strips-it-down-for-a-sensational-dangerous-liaisons/), [[2]](https://www.wrentheatre.com/lesliaisons), [[4]](https://www.broadwayworld.com/ottawa/article/Review-DANGEROUS-LIAISONS-at-Kanata-Theatre-20241107)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.sesayarts.com/review-wren-theatre-strips-it-down-for-a-sensational-dangerous-liaisons/), [[6]](https://nowtoronto.com/culture/review-dangerous-liaisons/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.sesayarts.com/review-wren-theatre-strips-it-down-for-a-sensational-dangerous-liaisons/), [[7]](https://rochester.kidsoutandabout.com/content/beyond-nest-reviews-rochester-city-ballets-dangerous-liaisons)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/mar/27/dangerous-liaisons-review-ballet-never-looked-so-much-like-a-strip-club), [[5]](https://www.the-independent.com/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/dangerous-liaisons-west-yorkshire-playhouse-leeds-544233.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.sesayarts.com/review-wren-theatre-strips-it-down-for-a-sensational-dangerous-liaisons/), [[5]](https://www.the-independent.com/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/dangerous-liaisons-west-yorkshire-playhouse-leeds-544233.html)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.sesayarts.com/review-wren-theatre-strips-it-down-for-a-sensational-dangerous-liaisons/), [[6]](https://nowtoronto.com/culture/review-dangerous-liaisons/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.sesayarts.com/review-wren-theatre-strips-it-down-for-a-sensational-dangerous-liaisons/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.wrentheatre.com/lesliaisons> - Wren Theatre's upcoming 2025 production of 'Les Liaisons Dangereuses' is set to premiere in Toronto. The play, adapted by Christopher Hampton from Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's 1782 novel, delves into the manipulative and seductive games of two aristocrats in 18th-century France. The narrative explores themes of power, revenge, and moral decay as the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont engage in a dangerous wager to corrupt the virtuous Madame de Tourvel and the innocent Cécile de Volanges. The production promises a compelling portrayal of these complex characters and their intertwined fates.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/mar/27/dangerous-liaisons-review-ballet-never-looked-so-much-like-a-strip-club> - In 2019, Queensland Ballet's adaptation of 'Dangerous Liaisons' was reviewed by Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore in The Guardian. The production, choreographed by Liam Scarlett, presented a bold and provocative interpretation of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's 1782 novel. The review highlighted the intense and explicit nature of the performance, noting that scenes of sexual intimacy were depicted with unprecedented openness for a ballet. The costumes were praised for their period accuracy, and the choreography was noted for its vigorous confidence. However, the review also mentioned that the characterisation at times felt over the top, and the adaptation's attempt to translate an epistolary novel into dance posed challenges in conveying the complexity of the plot.
4. <https://www.broadwayworld.com/ottawa/article/Review-DANGEROUS-LIAISONS-at-Kanata-Theatre-20241107> - In November 2024, Courtney Castelino reviewed Kanata Theatre's production of 'Dangerous Liaisons' in BroadwayWorld Ottawa. Directed by Sarah Hegger, the play was staged at the Ron Maslin Playhouse. The review commended the performances of Megan LeMarquand as La Marquise de Merteuil and Stavros Sakiadis as Le Vicomte de Valmont, noting their vigour and captivating stage presence. The production's pacing was discussed, with the second half receiving praise for its improved flow. The review also mentioned the innovative staging of bedroom scenes and the use of accent lighting, highlighting the production's strengths despite some initial pacing issues.
5. <https://www.the-independent.com/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/dangerous-liaisons-west-yorkshire-playhouse-leeds-544233.html> - In 2016, The Independent published a review of Northern Ballet Theatre's 'Dangerous Liaisons' at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds. Choreographed by David Nixon, the ballet adaptation of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's 1782 novel was noted for its use of a spoken flashback narration to keep the action moving. The review critiqued the characterisation, suggesting that the ballet's reliance on narration to explain character relationships might indicate a misalignment with the story's essence. The production's attempt to translate an epistolary novel into dance was discussed, highlighting the challenges in conveying the plot's complexity without dialogue.
6. <https://nowtoronto.com/culture/review-dangerous-liaisons/> - NOW Magazine's 2016 review of Red One Theatre Collective's 'Dangerous Liaisons' at the Storefront Theatre in Toronto, directed by Jakob Ehman, praised the production's smart costume design by Holly Lloyd and the performances of Claire Burns as La Marquise de Merteuil and Daniel Briere as Le Vicomte de Valmont. The review highlighted the cold sensuality between Merteuil and Valmont, noting that while the production captured the elegance of the language and the frequent plot twists, it suggested that a bit more danger and nastiness would have enhanced the overall impact.
7. <https://rochester.kidsoutandabout.com/content/beyond-nest-reviews-rochester-city-ballets-dangerous-liaisons> - A review of Rochester City Ballet's 'Dangerous Liaisons' highlighted the performances of the lead dancers, particularly the portrayal of La Marquise de Merteuil as a beautiful but deadly spider who ensnares both men and women in her treacherous game. The review praised the dancers' acting skills as integral to their performances, noting the athletic prowess demonstrated in lifts and spins. A memorable scene between Merteuil and Valmont was highlighted for its choreography, where Merteuil reveals to Valmont that he too has fallen victim to her manipulations.