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SATURDAY

THEATER REVIEW

'Manners' takes the good with the bad — archly

By Michael Phillips

Tribune theater critic

The title "Rules for Good Manners in the Modern World" is a lie. The modern world in Jean-Luc Lagarce's elegant salon of a play feels at least a century out of date. This is deliberate. To American audiences, the play's universe may feel even more exotic. And that, thanks to the T.U.T.A. Midwest premiere of this odd, drolly sardonic piece, is a plus, not a minus.

Lagarce died in 1995, the year after he completed "Rules for Good Manners." He wrote it to be performed by one female. His inspiration for the piece came from an 1893 book of practical advice written by one Baroness Staff, whose pearls included: "Sitting up late at night reading novels is infallible for drawing that terrible network of crows' feet round the eyes which disfigures the prettiest face."

"Rules for Good Manners" is essentially Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Man soliloquy rejiggered for the insufferably entitled. It is a guide to the social niceties of life — a very French, very codified life — from birth to mourning one's elderly spouse, and even after.

Lagarce's character, identified simply as "The Woman," begins by advising us as to one's obligations regarding a proper

"Rules for Good Manners in the Modern World"

When: Through Nov. 28

Where: T.U.T.A. at Prop Thtr, 3502 N. Elston Ave.

Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$18 at 847-217-0691

birth certificate. Two witnesses must be present in order to secure the necessary forms. The importance of the right sort of godparents is crucial, she says.

"Find younger godparents, full of vim and vigor, get rid of the grandparents and you increase your child's future gifts and spare yourself boring funerals. That's how it's done."

From there, the monologue proceeds like a flotilla, gliding through a sea of potential societal mishaps. In this T.U.T.A. production at the Prop Thtr, which is shaped like a big brick shoebox, director Zeljko Djukic works with three women, not one, each of the three costumed like something out of Colette, in all the right layers of constricting garments (plus some gorgeous Art Nouveau stockings). First Kate Martin, who extracts all sorts of ironic archness from this supremely arch material, takes the lead, as Jennifer Byers and Dalia Cidzikaite serve as a dumb-show chorus. Then Byers



Jennifer Byers (from left), Dalia Cidzikaite and Kate Martin in "Rules for Good Manners in the Modern World."

takes over. Although Cidzikaite doesn't speak, her contribution is formidable: For one thing, she's a splendid cha-cha dancer.

This is a challenging high-style piece, with *longueurs* aplenty. Martin is better than Byers at keeping the audience attuned. But this production, part of the current "Playing French" festival, does what it is supposed to do. In an astute staging, scored (in part) to the Shostakovich waltz Stanley Kubrick used in "Eyes Wide Shut," it introduces us to a gimlet-eyed chronicler of pretense and privilege only now getting known here.