

THEATER REVIEW

'RULES FOR GOOD MANNERS
IN THE MODERN WORLD'

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: Through Nov. 28**Where:** T.U.T.A. at Prop Thtr,
3502 N. Elston**Tickets:** \$18**Call:** (847) 217-0691

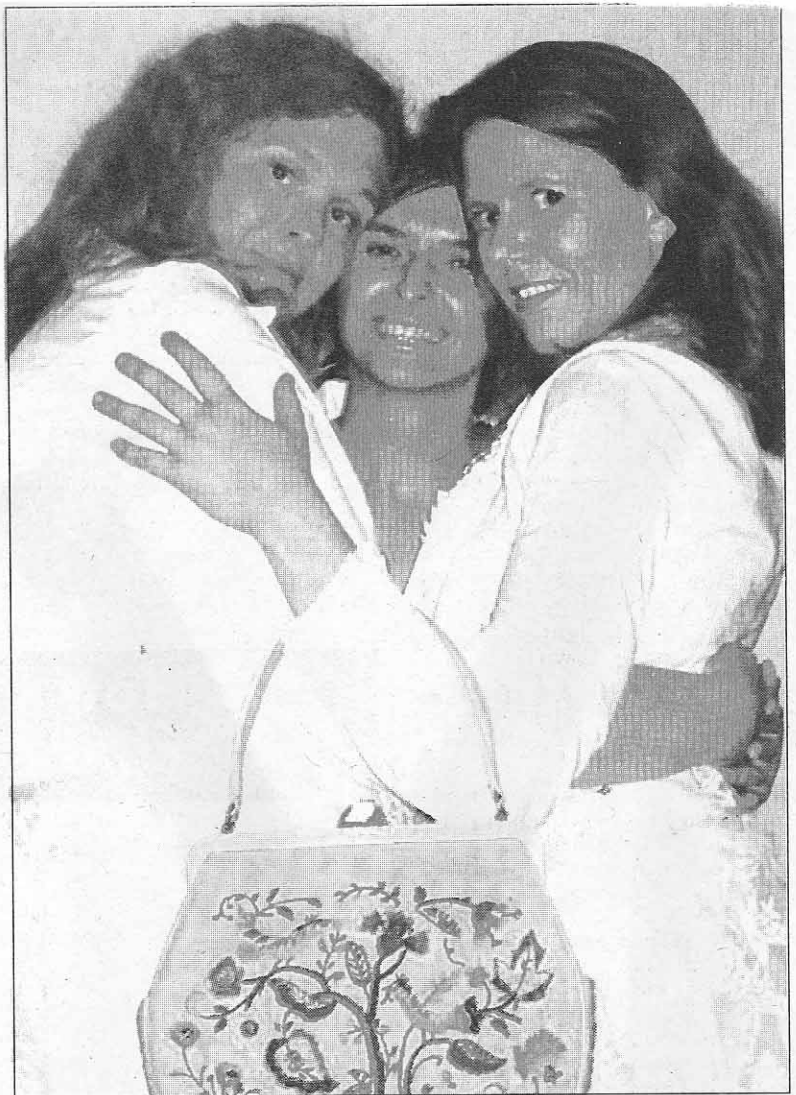
For starters, the Chicago-based T.U.T.A. (the Utopian Theatre Asylum) has more of a European aesthetic than most of the companies in this city, with a Bosnian-born director (Zeljko Djukic) and set and costume designer (his wife, Natasha Vuchurovich Djukic) as leaders of the creative team.

So it should come as no surprise that they have devised an exceedingly stylish production of "Rules for Good Manners in the Modern World" by Jean-Luc Lagarce — who, though he was just 38 when he died in 1995, was touted as one of France's most popular and prolific theater artists.

T.U.T.A. also has assembled a cast of three actresses who deal with Lagarce's exceptionally tricky and demanding material with inordinate skill, tapping into both the sanctimonious and slavish tone required by the drama, as well as its mischievous, pitch-black humor.

Watching "Rules," which runs a tight, oddly terrifying yet often hilarious 90 minutes, you can detect a long legacy of French-bred or French-influenced writers. There's a touch of Moliere (with talk of arranged marriages and social hypocrisy), as well as of American novelist Diane Johnson (whose novels *Le Divorce* and *Le Mariage* appeared after Lagarce's death). There's also a bit of the absurdist Ionesco at work here. But the play is so distinctive in its brilliant use of language and structure, so subtly acerbic in its view of the way society prescribes the womb-to-tomb rituals of life, that it is in a category all its own.

The French, Lagarce wants us to know, have a very particular way of doing things — a strict and highly constricting etiquette that proscribes (and prescribes) every aspect of life, love, death and mourning. Keeping one's behavior in sync with this rule book turns people into absurdly mannered creatures, which, as far as Lagarce is concerned, is as good a definition of the inhabitants of bourgeois society (or those who pretend to be part of it) as any. And the



Dalia Cidzikaite (from left), Jennifer Byers and Kate Martin star in T.U.T.A.'s "Rules for Good Manners in the Modern World."

more rules ruling human behavior, the more grotesque the result.

The clever set for "Rules" (a raised platform with mirrors at either end and the audience seated on two sides of a fashion show-style runway) suggests that indeed, fashion is all. And onto this stage come three attractive women — actresses Kate Martin, Jennifer Byers and Dalia Cidzikaite — identically dressed in long velvet skirts, prim blouses, bejeweled handbags and ornate hairdos.

Martin, with marvelously forked tongue, speaks first, delivering a long monologue in which she sets out the baroque rules by which godparents should be selected for a newborn or even (heaven forbid) for a founding. The complicated nature of these rules is mind-boggling, escalating to the level of near-insanity and gradually revealing the essential suppression of any genuine human emotion all along the way.

Next comes Byers, with her lush, unctuous tones that suggest the Southern belle as well as a French

bourgeoisie. She outlines in meticulous detail the entire step-by-step march from arranged courtship to engagement to wedding ceremony, dinner and honeymoon. The monologue is nothing short of a marvel of accrued detail and ludicrous Martha Stewart finickiness, with everything from the color of floral bouquets to approved eye contact being clearly spelled out. And there is always the proviso that those of "lesser means" might adjust the rules as absolutely necessary.

It does not stop there, as additional monologues lead us through the inevitable painful interludes and joyful anniversaries and stiffly ritualized response to mortality that are a part of family life. Throughout, Cidzikaite bears silent witness, as the women deck themselves out in bridal gowns and then black mourning outfits, with a final small but winning celebration of their liberation, too.

Director Djukic never misses a beat, even though Lagarce's "Rules" — almost a musical score — is no easy piece to play.