

***The Recruiting Officer***  
Farquhar in the Park by RL Nesvet



It's been a slow day for recruiting officer Kite. The army needs soldiers for an incomprehensible foreign war, or maybe several, but he has managed to sign up only five new soldiers, and one is a lawyer. "Are you mad in the head? Enlist a lawyer? Discharge him!" his superior officer, Captain Plume, shouts. "I will have no man in my army who can write, for he will write ... petitions!"

George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, smartly produced by the New York Classical Theater, sounds as if it were written yesterday, but it was first produced in the 18th century.

Captain Plume, played by Torsten Hillhouse, is a class A jerk who believes "it is our policy to leave as many recruits in the county as we take out." This has made him a deadbeat dad many times over. Plume is in love with Sylvia Balance, the daughter of a local judge. Plume's best buddy, civilian dilettante Worthy, is in love with Sylvia's cousin Melinda, who has rebuffed him. Both women have money, which makes them even more attractive to the men.

Meanwhile, don't ask how the war is going. When Sylvia's wise father does, Plume replies that, on his last deployment, "we were so intent on victory we paid no attention to the battle."

The principal actors use their comic skills to amp up the silliness. As Plume, Hillhouse struts like a peacock and delivers his most absurd lines with a caustic deadpan. Shad Ramsey's Worthy jumps around in the pain of unrequited love, contorting his body and screwing up his face like Jim Carrey on Turkish coffee.

Sylvia (Katie Sigisimund) spends a large part of the play in drag, aping the perfect recruit. Sigisimund plays these scenes with confidence and a low voice. As the braggart soldier Brazen, Sean Hagerty speaks in a silly, plummy accent and is endearingly obnoxious. Erik Gratton's Kite is at his loopy best as a fake fortune teller.

Director Grant Neale's promenade theater staging is minimal but effective. After every few scenes, a pair of musicians, Ricky Ryerson and James Honderich, perform 18th-century folk music while leading the audience through the park to a new location. (On the night I saw it, they made an unexpected detour around a Parks Service tractor and a garbage van without skipping a beat.) Like recruits, the audience must follow the leaders.

Production designer Amelia Dombrowski's costumes suggest the silhouettes of 18th-century clothes but are not period-play copies. I especially liked the foppish Worthy's pinstriped frock coat, decorated with what appears to be pieces of a necktie.

Farquhar was much better at writing political satire than romance. For most of the play, he keeps the lovers apart, leaving little opportunity for the actors to build chemistry. This makes the romance seem contrived, but that may be Farquhar's cynical intention.

Like the Public Theater's annual Shakespeare in the Park season, *The Recruiting Officer* is produced outdoors in Central Park, and admission is free. Unlike Shakespeare in the Park, you don't need to wait on long lines to reserve tickets. Simply show up and watch. With that policy, great performances, and Farquhar's funny, timely script, you have no excuse not to enlist.