

Molière Travels to Texas and Beyond

Playing a 384 year-old playwright in 2006

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I'm the guy who gets to be Molière for our generation.

It wasn't something I planned on. Not even something I worked toward doing. It just kind of happened.

Sometimes your career just kind of finds you.

Molière and I go back as far as high school. Actually, farther than that, if you count watching Warner Brothers cartoons.

In high school, I had a role in the modern adaptation, Scapino, and I had no idea of the rich comic history into which I had inadvertently dipped my toe, but in retrospect something was going on between me and Molière even then.

Ten years later, I revisited Molière as assistant director to Tartuffe at the Seattle Rep. It was one of those casts that's just as funny off stage as they are on, and the show was a major sellout for the Rep.

Ten years after that, I was running my own theatre company, Stage Two, in the Chicago suburbs, and we needed a well-known work to recover from our steady diet of original plays. It was then that I remembered Tartuffe, and the rest of the company seemed excited to take on something classical for once.

But wait: just to keep in step with our mission of doing original work, let me take a good hard look at Tartuffe, and see what happens if I try to adapt my own

new rhyming version of it. My memories of the Seattle Rep production were vivid, and I could “hear” words those actors might use amid their playful improvisation.

Two thousand rhymes later, I had a new script for *Tartuffe* and a new career in the theatre.

In the process of writing, I would listen for where the joke lies, and then write new words to regenerate that joke for a modern audience. Sometimes, I find that a given translator may, in remaining true to Moliere's literal expression, overlook the theatrical zing of the moment.

From *Tartuffe* I went on a tear through Molière's catalogue: *The Miser*, *The School for Wives*, *The Misanthrope*, *The Imaginary Invalid*, *The Schemings of Scapin*, *Don Juan*, *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, *The Precious Young Maidens*. I was re-envisioning the catalogue of the greatest comic writer of all time.

I was writing too fast. I had written a dozen new scripts, but had produced only three or four. Other people would present my plays, and I would swing between elation and despair, as the producers seemed inconsistent in their abilities with the demands of these plays' very exacting iambic pentameter.

There was a quality of performance that these stylized works demanded which some actors (and directors) seemed to instinctively grasp, while others did not, and if my plays were to succeed, I had to create a vision for their performance in the eyes of these people.

Parallel to this, I was doing the luncheon circuit. I took my Molière lecture around to the Rotary, the Elks, the Mensa Society and even the Canadian Womens' Guild. I talked about his fascinating life, and my work with his work, and tried to sell a few tickets.

Until one day, I heard disappointment in the voice of one of my lecture hosts. She supposed that a lecture about Molière would be okay, but ...

“What? Was there something else you were interested in?”

“Well, the last guest we had in one of our luncheons performed Shakespeare’s Women, a kind of a one-woman show with monologues from Shakespeare.”

Hmm. I had always frowned on the idea of such a one-person show. Surely this was the last refuge of somebody who cannot get cast, who intends to do damage to the works of a great playwright on her way down.

And yet...

I had portrayed several of the leading characters already, roles that were originally played by Molière. (Between the writing and the performing, I was feeling an eerie parallel between Molière's life and my own.)

Authors with rights to the other translations in circulation were mostly French scholars, and largely uninterested in performing these works themselves.

In other words, my work to this date had made me uniquely qualified to perform something of this nature.

Moreover, I could start to envision all of the good that this kind of work might do:

Re-introduce the modern world to Molière.

Introduce the theatrical world to a style of Molière performance.

Introduce the catalogue of Molière to performers and producers who have probably encountered only one or two of these works over the course of their careers.

And it was here I made my now-famous resolution: “When you discover yourself to be uniquely qualified to do a thing ... when you find that thing that

no one else in the world can do in quite the way that you can ... then you are spiritually obligated to do that thing. Failing to do so screws with your karma.”

And so I wrote my one-man play. I started memorizing monologues, and envisioning a framework. Why would Molière be alone onstage? Well, I speculated, his cast had all come down with food poisoning, and he didn't want to refund the audience's money. He had all of these plays memorized anyway, since King Louis XIV might well demand a performance of one of them at any time. (Louis was an early proponent of “on-demand”.)

Perfect. It gave Molière the chance to dance his way through his favorite monologues, taking the kinds of cheap shots that he has always enjoyed taking at the expense of the medical establishment.

Before long, a friend suggested the perfect title to me and “Molière Than Thou” was born.

(I've now been doing this show for five years, and the only people who don't chuckle at the title “Molière Than Thou,” are those whose native language is French. It seems to be a pun that just doesn't translate, and no amount of explaining will ever be able to make it funny.)

In less than four years of touring, I've put 170,000 miles on my car, passing through every state in the nation, and passing through Texas more than half-a-dozen times, while doing my show for more than thirty thousand students.

Most of them are getting their first exposure to the work of Molière.

Most of them are seeing their first one-person show.

Many of them are meeting their first live professional actor.

And most of them are shocked to discover that a man from the seventeenth century so vividly understood the world that they live in today, writing about

sex and hypocrisy, and arrogance and politics and self-righteous self-importance in a way that seems to be ripped from the front pages of our newspapers.

Because Molière was writing in what was for him, “the now,” and because he had an eye that saw through the trappings of what was for him, “the modern,” he captured human qualities in a way that occasionally makes us gasp with astonishment.

And I get to recreate that all over again for a new generation. It’s a great job.