

Molière for the Modern Masses: Playing a 383-year-old Playwright in 2005

Contrary to popular belief, sex was not invented in the 1960s.

It wasn't even invented in our parents' generation!

Hypocrisy was not invented in any current or recent political administration.

Nor were stupidity, pretentiousness, envy, self-righteousness, self-importance, self-aggrandizement, idiocy, sensuality, media gag orders, pathetic back-pedaling, unfounded jealousy, legal red tape, nor the undercover operative.

We know this because they can all be found in the works of Molière.

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.

"How did he *know*?"

I am not a French scholar. I play the role of Molière onstage, in English. While I might love to be able to perform these works in their original, glorious French, I am thrilled to have found such a large audience, beyond the French scholars, for Molière's brilliance who, in turn, may well trace their way back to the original French. I travel the United States and Canada, with my own one-man show, *Molière Than Thou*. I have a favorite line in the play, and the older the audience is, the more they laugh.

As Molière, speaking to what he thinks is a 1671 audience, introduces his play *Tartuffe*, he interrupts himself mid-thought to note that "Even though this play was originally written more than seven years ago, in *sixteen sixty-four!* ... our ongoing scandals of the present day have kept this work *just as pertinent as it was the day that it was first produced!*"

Molière didn't know that he was writing for all time. He was probably surprised to find that his plays had lasted the test of seven years and would be astonished that they are still performed today.

We cannot help making our comparisons between Molière and Shakespeare. It's usually the first question I am asked. Interviewers are ready to jump at any insinuation that their beloved Shakespeare is any less than the greatest, most brilliant, cleverest, most moving, deepest, etc., etc.

Molière will gladly settle for being the funniest.

The comparisons between the men are profound. They wrote their greatest works separated by less than sixty years. They each left their stamp on the language of their culture. You cannot spend a day speaking English without quoting Shakespeare,

probably several times through the course of the day, and generally without knowing it. Likewise is the French language indelibly stamped as "*la langue de Molière*."

Both men were actors, assuming that the Shakespeare who wrote all of those plays was indeed the man who appeared onstage and not actually the nineteenth Earl of Oxford.

And, if further evidence should reveal that the Earl of Oxford did in fact write all of those plays currently credited to a man named "Shakespeare," then the two men have something else in common: They both wrote under assumed names. Jean Baptiste Poquelin used the name Molière to protect his family, which should remind us that life as a playwright was not the honorable thing we assume it to be today.

With historical perspective, we look back and see our favorite playwrights "under glass," or plaster-cast, on display in the museum, but to truly appreciate them, we must realize that they were anything but that. They were creating their art, and pushing their own individual envelopes, irreverent in the face of pompous snobbery, caught in the maelstrom of society, fighting to keep their families and their companies fed, struggling to fulfill an artistic vision unique to themselves, all the while angling to stay on the good side of the monarch. Actors were accorded the same respect as prostitutes, sometimes with good reason. An unrepentant actor could not be buried in sacred ground, or with the full rites and rituals of the church.

Molière spent about thirteen years on the road. After an early failure in the Parisian theatre, he fled from town, probably one step ahead of the bill collector. He had been tossed into debtor's prison at least twice, bailed out each time by his father, who already had good reason to be bitter about his son's career. (His son had, after all, forsworn the family business, and the position purchased for him in King Louis' court.) Molière and his troupe, the Illustrious Theatre, chased after a dream that had to be deferred upon the road. They wanted to be brilliant tragedians, but fate tossed them into the street, where Commedia was king. There, they honed their craft to appeal to the lowest common denominator. Setting up in a courtyard or a town square, they fought for the attention alongside the apple sellers, the pimps, the pickpockets, and the snake-oil salesmen.

Performing out in the open is rather like trying to hold the attention of a cat. You need to be endlessly inventive and spontaneous, and when something isn't working, or when

a bigger distraction comes along, you need to be ready to shift into your best stuff at a moment's notice. A wink, a nod, a gesture, and suddenly you're digging deeper and aiming lower. Clever dialogue gives way to vulgar by-play, and for the moment, at least, you have their attention back. What a training ground for the man who learned, better than any, how to engage an audience in the action of a play!

Shakespeare wrote of safe subjects, heroes and dramas from centuries before. Molière wrote about the here and now. The people he depicted were probably actually sitting out in the audience. Their antics would become the source of endless mockery, and in the process, Molière stacked up one enemy on top of another: doctors, lawyers, priests, fellow actors, his sponsor-turned-nemesis, Prince Conti, and the *Society du Saint Sacrement*. In the process, he captured, not only seventeenth-century France, but us, ourselves, here and now.

We have forgotten how well Molière captured us.

There is a veil drawn between Molière and ourselves. We remain largely unaware of that veil, because it was drawn before any of us was alive. It is the Victorian era, an age of prudish denial. Thomas Bowdler censored Shakespeare's works in 1807, and his versions of these works sold the most copies through the reign of Victoria, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century. Under the shadow of this era, Molière's canon was performed in English versions that still echo with us today. Early translations committed the worst of sins upon the work: Not only do they shy from Molière's ribald idiom, but often *they aren't really funny!*

Molière created brilliant scenarios. He was a forerunner in every style of comedy now known to us: farce, situation comedy, musical comedy, drawing room comedy (aka, "comedy of manners") and political satire. Yes, he balanced insightful ideas on the heads of his characters, who unveiled them delicately and deliberately as the action unwound with clockwork precision. But he did all of this in the service of the laugh, and if it isn't funny, then it isn't true to Molière.

When audiences meet this new Molière, they are suddenly confronted. Can this be the man who lived almost four hundred years ago? It is an era we have placed under glass ... in a museum, behind velvet ropes, frozen, immobile. The traditions of stylized performance are handed down from one performer to the next. They learn gestures, activities, inflections, postures, attitudes, handed from father to son, as it were,

just as Jean Poquelin once attempted to hand the traditions of his craft down to his son, Jean Baptiste. Jean Baptiste knew enough to resist.

People don't go to the theatre to study the past.

They go to see themselves.

The modern director hauls out all of the old period style tricks: corsets, fans and foils. And suddenly Molière's play is about postures and poses and frilly nonsense that has nothing to do with the play itself.

The modern student of French likewise has to struggle to find himself in Molière. I have a hard enough time reading Shakespeare in English. But reading classical verse in French? Picking through the delicate word-play and the baroque phrasings is quite difficult enough. It isn't until you see the thing live that you realize: "Oh, this is a buffoon that's talking!" "Oh, this man has an underlying motive behind this lie!" "Oh, for the servant to speak up to her master like that is a pretty brazen move!" "Why, that's ... Hilarious!"

It is a liberating thing to look into the past and see yourself.

We live in the context of the ongoing "now." We struggle to resolve needs. We keep secrets from those around us ... those parts of ourselves with which we are the least comfortable. Secret desires, idiosyncrasies, needs, upsets, challenges, failures and our own personal buffooneries. We assume that no one has ever thought, suffered, desired or felt quite the way we do.

But Molière has painted them all, already.

Molière was creating psychological studies, before the phrase "psychological study" was invented. In fact, any cursory review of *The Imaginary Invalid* reveals the wife, Beline, as the classic "enabler," though they wouldn't have known to call her that back then.

Molière never saw a computer, but in *The School for Wives*, Molière creates a man that is so afraid of being made a fool of, that he will preprogram his wife-to-be, telling her exactly what to think and feel and believe. And just as with a computer, it's garbage in/garbage out.

In *The Bourgeois Gentleman* a self-important egotist writes an insipid love letter, and proceeds to create the conditions whereby his "philosophy master" cannot improve on it, save to parrot back his words, while the man is lost in a cloud of self-congratulation.

In *Tartuffe* he creates a brazen sensualist who envisions himself as above, not only the law, but all moral concerns, having entered his own pact with God. His hot pursuit of his patron's wife has echoes in each era,

and each political party. The sex scandal was not invented with Bill Clinton or Jimmy Swaggart. People have been driven by these feelings for as long as there have been people.

We see them in the full context of the seventeenth century, and we realize the greatest thing that any student of history might realize: "They were just like us."

I get the pleasure of creating those "lightbulb moments" for people.

Molière Than Thou is a different play every time I perform it. It fluctuates with the audience ... their subjective mood, their age, the time of day, their level of supervision, the cost of the tickets, the brightness of the lights, or their own interest in the subject matter. Are they here because they are studying French, Theatre or History, or are they just getting out of a class? Have they been growled at to sit silently, or do they feel free to laugh and respond? Have they been prepped with selections from the study guide, or are they coming at it from zero? Is the front row twenty feet away, or am I performing with the audience right on top of me?

The audience interaction changes the play from one day to another. I choose "victims" to whom I may deliver some of these speeches, casting them as Agnes in *School for Wives*, or Magdeline in *Precious Young Maidens*. Molière invites students to volunteer to play out scenes, and no one (including myself) knows just how the *Tartuffe* scene will play out with an unwitting Elmire stepping into the role. Some nights, it is a sensual encounter, some nights it is a farcical chase around the stage.

And then there are those night-to-night changes that are the product of the changing world around us. Some nights I stumble across a line, and it is suddenly more vivid, as though Molière is commenting on the day's events from three hundred thirty years away. As the U.S. pursued a war against Iraq, these lines from *Sganarelle, or the Imaginary Cuckold*, took on greater intensity:

Is life not simply difficult enough
Without "dishonor" added to this stuff?
There's sickness, hunger, pestilence
and war
Which on their own are ample with-
out more
These things will chase us down with-
out our stirring!
Must we, here, pad the list then, by
incurring
Our honor's wrath at every irritation?
No! No more self-inflicted flagellation!

In the months that followed, the subject of gay marriage began making headlines, and a different Sganarelle says, referencing his master, Don Juan:

You say he wed your mistress? Fancy that!

He would have wed your wife! Your dog! Your cat!

And if he thought it might so stir his health,

He'd fetch the preacher and wed you yourself!

And, only recently, with the news of the devastation and the injustice that was hurricane Katrina, again, Sganarelle tortures his logic with:

The riches are what make the people rich,

And the rich are not the poor, left in some ditch,

The poor have needs, and needs know not of laws,

And those who know no laws, are beasts with claws ...

From one night to the next, I never know when a line from Molière is going to reach up and hit me in the head. I've been repeating these words for more than five years, Molière created them in their original French more than three hundred years ago, and these passages are illuminated every day by the latest headlines. This was the world of Molière? It looks just like our own! Who knew?

And so I travel throughout the U.S. and Canada with these words. And it is interesting where I land with them: Tennessee, Virginia, Georgia, Texas ... states where you wouldn't expect Molière to be so huge. One high school in eastern Tennessee has brought me back for three years running! Every year the audience gets a little bit bigger, as reports of the show circulate while I am gone, and these high school French and Theatre students prepare more actively for the show. The laughs get bigger, and the volunteers more eager. And in the middle of this most recent performance, I find myself thinking: Almost all of them are seeing their first one-person play. Almost all of them are seeing their first Molière performance. The students of today become the specialists of tomorrow.

Molière wrote of his own time, his own people, and his own observations. He painted scathing portraits of the pretentious and the hypocritical. He rallied the common man to laugh at cheats and liars. He tormented the doctors, the lawyers and the falsely pious. He observed with such truth, and such wit, that these idiosyncrasies of the seventeenth century seem to target our own lives today. Watching him now, we too are liberated and armed against our own would-be oppressors with weapons of laughter and ridicule. He is the most modern of our classical playwrights.

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