The Misanthrope

by Molière | adapted by Constance Congdon ‘82G

directed by Mary Corinne Miller | Rand Theater | Oct 19 Half-Price
Preview at 7:30 | Oct 21 Opening Night at 7:30 | Oct 26 Student Matinee at 10:00 AM | Oct 22, 27, 28, and 29 at 7:30 | Oct 29 at 2:00 | Fine Arts Center
Box Office: 413-545-2511, 1-800-999-UMAS | umass.edu/theater | 

UMassAmherst Theater
Fall 2016 Study Guide
Our Production

The UMass Theater Department’s production of *The Misanthrope* strives to make this classic text feel alive and relevant for today’s audiences. Consequently, we have chosen to set it as a filming of a sitcom entitled *The Misanthrope*. Audiences will enter the theater, enveloped in the world of a live studio taping. They will see the “celebrities” offstage personas as well as the characters in the play itself. While the language is in verse, this play is very accessible. Audiences will recognize this characters from their own lives, albeit perhaps in exaggerated forms (sounds just like good TV, right?).

Moreover, this sitcom is set in Brooklyn, NY with a group of young urban hipsters. There is arguably nothing more “false” than the pretentious and self-righteous “cool” individuals inhabiting this enclave of the up-and-coming. Boutique thrift stores, microbreweries, and fixed-gear bicycles abound. Hipsters like to think they are individuals, while really actually just belonging to a subculture of like-minded people with similar aesthetics. (Just check out the silly youtube video “The Evolution of the Hipster”.) This play then examines what it means to be an individual, and to be sincere and truthful in one’s own interests and in relationships with other humans. Can Alceste (played by Molière himself in the original production) do it? Can hipsters? Can we?
**Possible Classroom Exercises**

**Theater:** Have students take one of the people from the images in the page above and write a character bio (perhaps using Uta Hagen’s questions if they are familiar) about their personal history, likes and dislikes. Discuss what costumes and physical poses can tell us about a character.

**English/French:** Using the discussion of form and verse below, have the students write a neoclassical scene of social satire, or write a scene in verse that is a social commentary. Using these grammatical rules, help students understand how many classical plays examined social hierarchies and inequalities through comedy.

**History:** Have students discuss the social world in which this play was originally written (the court of Louis XIV). Rules of etiquette were paramount in court life. In what ways does Molière show deference to the King and the court, and how does he make fun of them? How do students see similar resonances of those differences in social class and behavior even today?
Molière's Life and Work

Molière was born in Paris on January 15, 1662 and died on February 17, 1673. Molière is a stage name, his given name was Jean-Baptiste Poquelin and he was the eldest of six children. His father was an upholsterer who bought the title of Royal Upholsterer with the intention to pass on this royal appointment to Molière, who had different ideas. Molière’s mother, Mary Cresse, died when he was 12 years old.

At fourteen he went to the College de Claremont and later studied law at the University of Orleans. But his life took a turn in 1643 when he started a theatre company (Illustre Théâtre, Illustrious Theatre Company) with brother and sister Joseph and Madeleine Bejart. The company failed and Molière ended up in debtors’ prison. When he got out, the company spent thirteen years touring the provinces.

On return to Paris in 1658 Molière, who by now had taken the stage name so his family wouldn't be embarrassed, and his company were able to perform for the king. This would be the beginning of Molière's theatre career in Paris and patronage by King Louis XIV. This patronage often saved Molière from harsh criticism of his life and work. It even extended to the King acting as godfather to his children.

In 1652 Molière married Armande Bejart, twenty years his junior. There is a lot of speculation as to who Armande was. She was either the sister or the daughter of his former theatre partner (and mistress) Madeleine. It was quite the unhappy marriage. Molière died of tuberculosis. Mythology says that he fell ill in the middle of a performance of The Imaginary Invalid and died soon after.

Molière's life in the theatre
Molière’s love for theatre began early. His grandfather introduced him to theatre, where he first experienced commedia dell’arte. Molière started his theatre career as an actor and director for his company Illustre Théâtre. He began writing plays when his company went out to tour the country. And for the next thirteen years Molière learned his craft through production and performance.

In 1658 Molière and his company performed in front of the king – this was a significant moment for Molière. Theatre companies could not perform in Paris without permission. The first play they presented was a tragedy that was not well-
received. The second was a comedy (*The Doctor in Love*) that found a much more positive reaction from the King. Molière's company acquired patronage and was allowed to perform. Eventually they secured the Palais Royal as their performance space. In 1665 they were given the title Troupe du Roy (Troupe of the King). It was through writing comedy that Molière finally found success.

**Molière's way of writing**

Molière's writing was very much influenced by commedia dell'arte but his style grew from that influence. He is often relegated to the role of comic frivolous playwright, perhaps because his plays thrive in their physical action and their snappy dialogue. But this interpretation misses the level of biting social satire he brought to his work.

He wrote about the flaws of humanity, the humanity that he saw all around him, every day. He created characters filled with extremes: misers, hypocrites, hypochondriacs, misanthropes. These characters were so driven by their extremes that they crashed through their stories with blinders on, unable to do anything but exude their fatal flaw. There are always characters who oppose these extremes in Molière's work, expressing the moderate voice. He mocked the upper classes which made him a lot of enemies. He also made a great enemy in the church. At one point the Archbishop threatened that he would excommunicate anyone who saw, performed or even read *Tartuffe*. *Dom Juan* was banned after only 15 performances.

Molière also wrote for himself as an actor. He starred in the productions of his plays, playing Arnolphe in *The School for Wives*, Tartuffe in *Tartuffe*, Alceste in *The Misanthrope*, Argan in *The Imaginary Invalid*. There is a mythology that Molière drew from his own life, putting his own emotions and feelings into characters. In 1662 Molière was 42 and in a marriage with a much younger woman. Arnolphe is the same age in *School for Wives* and in a similar situation. Later in life Molière was often ill and a known hypochondriac just like Argan in *The Imaginary Invalid*. But that's a rather simplistic view of his works. The writing process isn’t a matter of plunking life directly into art, there is transformation and elevation.

**Form and Verse**

The first verse play Molière wrote was *The School for Wives*. He used the “alexandrine” form of poetry - twelve syllables to a line (as opposed to the 10 syllable iambic pentameter that Shakespeare used). The text was then set in rhyming couplets, giving the dialogue a defined rhythm. Most English translations that keep the play in verse change the meter to iambic pentameter.

Molière wrote in a time of rules. Neoclassicism was not just encouraged, it was enforced. And although Molière is thought of as a neoclassic playwright, he often went against the rules of the form. For example, the maid Dorine in *Tartuffe* speaks with wisdom far above her station, which was against the neoclassic
principle of decorum. Also, the deus ex machina ending of *Tartuffe* where a god, or in this play the king, dives in and saves the play at the last minute was not in line with neo-classic rules. *The Misanthrope* is neither a strict comedy nor a tragedy. In the neo-classical world characters who exhibit extreme behavior are supposed to atone and return to the fold of moderate behavior. Though the main character in *Tartuffe* is arrested for his religious hypocrisy at the end of the play, there is no indication that he has changed his ways.

**What is a Comedy of Manners?**

A Comedy of Manners is a play that satires the manners and behavior of a society through larger-than-life characters. The characters act in a sophisticated manner, but their flaws shine through. Usually those who were being mocked were in the audience, which Molière did not always disguise well. This may be that he didn't just make fun of the fashion of the day, he struck to the heart of human flaws. Molière is more than a frivolous writer, offending no-one and saying nothing. Molière's stab at society is what makes him universal. For as he makes fun of the hypocrisy, materialism and frivolity of his society, could not the same jabs apply to ours?

**Is The Misanthrope neoclassical?**

Here are the elements that follow the rules of neo-classicism:

1. It takes place in one location.
2. The events of the play take place within twenty-four hours (from one evening to another).
3. There is one story.
4. Five act form.
5. Alceste is against those who act against moral virtues.
6. Celimene is punished for her behavior.
7. The characters who act within the most natural behavior (Philinte and Eliante) decide to get married.

**But....**

The play is neither a strict comedy nor a strict tragedy. Alceste, who is technically the “hero” of the piece, does not learn from his extreme behavior and change his ways. Though he states he's going to live in isolation, would that really be punishment for a misanthrope? Also, the play does not look back to a story of Ancient Greece or Rome, it takes place in the here and now for Molière's audience.
The History and Context of *The Misanthrope*

17th century France was late to join the explosion of art and creativity that was already sweeping England and other parts of Europe, known as the Renaissance. France had endured tumultuous civil and religious strife in the preceding decades, which was settled by the Edict of Nantes in 1594 which prohibited the persecution of Protestants (or Huguenots).

Italian culture came to have a profound impact on the French arts in the 17th century. Italian commedia dell'arte troupes were an extremely popular form of entertainment. Molière himself based much of his work on the structure and archetypal characters of commedia.

In 1636, Cardinal Richelieu established the French Academy, based on the Italian tradition. The Academy was made up of a finite number of specially invited artists and scholars in a variety of fields. They determined the unified aesthetic of the French arts, and Richelieu could defer to them for rulings in matters of theater and style. For example, when Molière’s *Tartuffe* scandalized the Roman Catholic Church and other members of society, Richelieu appealed to the Academy for an official statement on the play’s content. Richelieu and the Academy supported Neoclassism, an aesthetic style based on classical Greek and Roman traditions.

Molière’s plays frequently adhere to these traditions, but he was also critical of the rules of the Academy, and his work is unique from what was traditional at the time. For one thing, Molière’s plays tend to focus more on character development than on plot. Additionally, his flawed characters are not reintegrated into society at the end of the plays.

Many of the theatres in Molière’s time were fashioned from old tennis courts. They were long halls, with a platform stage at one end which eventually developed a proscenium arch, and were fitted with complex machinery needed to create the elaborate and spectacular scenery that was popular in Italy. Spectators stood on the ground in front of the stage, or were seated in the galleries along the sides. Some particularly wealthy and vain patrons – probably quite similar to the character of Acaste – were even seated directly on the stage.
Le Grand Siècle

The 17th-century in France, under the rule of Louis XIV, was known as the grand siècle (or the splendid century). This was an era of extravagance, decorum, and wit. A common pastime for the upper classes was attendance at “salons” – where an inspiring host would gather people to engage in entertaining and stimulating conversation. This was often an opportunity for individuals to show off their wit, philosophies, and poetic skills.

17th century France was a time of great change and transformation. It was a time of war, a time of cultural advancements, a time of thinking and science. There was also a growing gulf between the aristocracy and the lower classes, the building blocks for the French Revolution later in the 18th century.

Louis XIV

Louis the XIV, the self proclaimed Sun King, ruled for 72 years from 1643-1715. His father died when he was five years old and for a number of years the country was run by Cardinal Mazarin and Louis’ mother. But by the time he had reached his early twenties, he was firmly in control. Ruling as an absolute monarch, Louis XIV is the king who reportedly made the statement “L’Etat, c’est moi” – I am the state. Consequently, Louis had a strong influence on the artistic culture of France. He was determined to build the culture of France just as he was determined to establish the power position of France. While a strong supporter of the arts he was also known for his extravagance; the palace of Versailles was built during his reign.

Wars

France was involved with a number of wars in the 17th century. These wars, along with Louis XIV’s extravagance led to a crushing debt for France.
30 years war 1618-1648
The Fronde (series of civil wars) 1648-1653
Franco Spanish War 1635-1659
War of Devolution 1667-68
Franco Dutch war 1672-1678
War of the Reunions 1683-1684
Nine Years War 1688-1697
The Misanthrope GLOSSARY

[misanthrope: noun. a person who dislikes humankind and avoids human society]

(page numbers from the published Constance Congdon version)

2 mitigate: lessen the gravity of (an offense or mistake)

3 Heaven forfend: [archaic or humorous] used to express dismay or horror at the thought of something happening

4 à propos (and p. 65, apropos p. 37): very appropriate to a particular situation

5 The School for Husbands: Molière’s first full-length play, first performed in Paris in 1661. The plot centers on the suitors of two sisters, each of whom is a ward of the two men. One suitor, Sganarelle, is controlling and overbearing of his intended wife Isabella. The other suitor, Sganarelle’s older brother Ariste, treats his intended Léonor more as an equal. Ariste eventually finds success in his pursued relationship, while Sganarelle fails miserably, so much so, in fact, that he is unwittingly used by Isabella in seeking her preferred courter, Valère.

5 sycophant: a person who acts obedient or attentive to an excessive or servile degree toward someone important in order to gain advantage

5 pernicious (and p. 51): having a harmful effect, especially in a gradual or subtle way

6 clod: [informal] a stupid person (often used as a general term of abuse)

6 Beast from the Abyss: the Devil

7 solicitor: a member of the legal profession

8 cadre: a small group of people, generally specially trained for a particular purpose or profession

8 effrontery: insolent or impertinent behavior

8 rectitude: morally correct behavior or thinking; righteousness

9 coquettish: behaving in such a way as to suggest a playful sexual attraction; flirtatious

9 ardor: enthusiasm or passion

10 approbation: approval or praise

12 dispensation: exemption from a rule or usual requirement

12 legerdemaine: deception, trickery

12 wan: (of a person’s complexion or appearance) pale and giving the impression of illness or exhaustion

12 Philis: likely a personification of the Greek φιλις, which means “loving”
ennui: [from the French] a feeling of listlessness and dissatisfaction arising from a lack of occupation or excitement

zealous (and on p. 63): having or showing great energy or enthusiasm in pursuit of a cause or an objective

interred: placed (a corpse) in a grave or tomb, typically with funeral rites

noxious: harmful, poisonous, or very unpleasant

avaricious: having or showing an extreme greed for wealth or material gain

deposit: the quality of being affectedly and irritatingly grand, solemn, or self-important

De gustibus non disputantem est.: [Latin] “The debate is not about taste.”

His little finger has a nail this long. Think of the many doors he's scratched upon to gain some entry.: People who wanted to speak to the king at Versailles could not knock on his door. Instead, using the left little finger, they had to gently scratch on the door, until they were granted permission to enter. As a result, many courtiers grew that fingernail longer than the others!

salon: [historical] a regular social gathering of eminent people (especially writers and artists) at the house of a woman prominent in high society

politic: seeming sensible and judicious under the circumstances

arcane: understood by few; mysterious or secret

plies: provide someone with (food or drink) in a continuous or insistent way

bombe glace: [a bombe in English] an ice cream dessert frozen in a spherical mold so as to resemble a cannonball, hence the name

bon mots: [from the French “good words”] witty remarks

Diogenes: (c.400 – c.325 BCE), Greek philosopher; the most noted of the Cynics, he emphasized self-sufficiency and the need for natural, uninhibited behavior, regardless of social conventions

consummate: showing a high degree of skill and flair; complete or perfect

risible: such as to provoke laughter

eschew: deliberately avoid using; abstain from

swarthy: dark-skinned

lithe: (especially of a person's body) thin, supple, and graceful

slattern: [dated] a dirty, untidy woman

execrable: extremely bad or unpleasant
Jade: [archaic] a bad-tempered or disreputable woman
acrimony: bitterness or ill feeling
proclivity: a tendency to choose or do something regularly; an inclination or predisposition toward a particular thing
cajole: persuade someone to do something by sustained coaxing or flattery
reprove: reprimand or censure
odious: extremely unpleasant; repulsive
base: without moral principles; ignoble
equivocations: the use of ambiguous language to conceal the truth or to avoid committing oneself; prevarication
circumspect: wary and unwilling to take risks
lechery: excessive or offensive sexual desire; lustfulness
cloying: disgust or sicken (someone) with an excess of sweetness, richness, or sentiment
dissembled: conceal one’s true motives, feelings, or beliefs
decanted: gradually pour (liquid, typically wine or a solution) from one container into another, especially without disturbing the sediment
malignancy: the quality of being evil in nature or effect; malevolent
reticence: the state of not revealing one’s thoughts or feelings readily
equanimité: mental calmness, composure, and evenness of temper, especially in a difficult situation

garrulous: excessively talkative, especially on trivial matters
largesse: generosity in bestowing money or gifts upon others