

Roundabout Theatre Company

The
Play's
the
Thing



NYNEX Family Series
Study Guide

THE PLAYWRIGHT

It would be unbelievable to anyone in the early part of the 20th century that by the 1990's very few people in the United States would recognize the name Ferenc Molnar. Between 1908 and 1940 Molnar had seventeen plays produced on Broadway. During some seasons Broadway sported two plays by Molnar, and in 1908 two productions of *THE DEVIL* hit the boards at the same time! Molnar's plays dominated stages across America. He was so famous that President Calvin Coolidge met with him the first time he traveled to this country.

Twenty-six movies and three musical comedies have been based on his plays. His work has been translated and adapted by such greats of the literary and theatre worlds as Edna St. Vincent Millay, David Belasco, Melville Baker, Sidney Howard and P.G. Wodehouse.

Puccini and Gershwin both applied for permission to transform Molnar's play *LILIOM* into an operetta. Astonishingly, Molnar refused to give them permission on the grounds that his play would be overshadowed by their music. When Molnar was approached by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II for the same permission, he agreed, thinking that the world would never pay more attention to a musical written by two nobodies than they would to his great masterpiece.

Ironically, the musical Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote based on Molnar's play, *LILIOM*, is much more famous than the original. While *LILIOM* has had several very successful runs on Broadway most people remember the stage and film versions of the musical *CAROUSEL* much more clearly. In allowing Rodgers and Hammerstein to create *CAROUSEL*, he totally eclipsed his play *LILIOM* in the hearts and minds of audiences all over the world.

Ferenc Molnar was born in Budapest, Hungary, on January 12, 1878. His childhood was a rather lonely one. Although his parents were wealthy they had very little time for their children. Reading was the young Molnar's greatest comfort and he wrote his first play at the age of fourteen. Called *BLUE CAVE*, the play was performed in the basement of a friend's house and caused a riot in the audience. This ended Molnar's career as a playwright until the age of twenty-four when he wrote *THE LAWYER*. Produced at the Comedy Theatre of Budapest in 1902, this play made Molnar a sensation in Hungary. Five years later he wrote *THE DEVIL* and became an international star. Producers all over the world fought for the rights to translate and produce this play. In the United States it played virtually everywhere at the same time (including the two productions on Broadway in 1908.)

THE PLAY'S THE THING was first produced in Budapest and New York in 1926 and proved to be another smashing success all over the world. In fact, *THE PLAY'S THE THING* has become Molnar's most popular play and has itself served as the basis for a musical adaptation made by the English playwright, Tom Stoppard. This play, called *ROUGH CROSSING*, has further extended the reach of the Molnar original.

Molnar maintained his world fame, producing play after play until the advent of World War II. His plays were exported to all the major cities of Europe, and Molnar exported himself as well. He traveled extensively and was celebrated everywhere. In addition to winning countless awards in his native Hungary, and meeting President Coolidge in the United States, Molnar was awarded the Legion of Honor in France for his play *THE SWAN*.

As a young man Molnar studied law in Geneva, but instead of becoming a lawyer

conversation could destroy Ilona's relationship with Adam, Almady's relationship with his wife and Turai and Mansky's relationship with their new young composer.

Perhaps the most obvious wrinkle in reality in *THE PLAY'S THE THING* revolves around Turai's determination to keep the overheard conversation from causing any damage. The only solution Turai can devise is the writing of yet another play using the conversation between Ilona and Almady as dialogue and thereby convince everyone that the real interchange was actually a rehearsal. Turai writes the play, claims that it was written by the French author, Sardou, and has Ilona and Almady perform it for the guests at the castle.

We, the audience in the theatre understand everything that has happened. But the audience members on the stage each understand the action to a different degree. Just as planned, Adam is convinced that Ilona was in rehearsal and their relationship is saved. Mansky believes that Turai is, for once, not in control of the situation and that things just worked out on their own. Mell, the Count's secretary believes that he has seen a brilliant new translation of a farce by Sardou and doesn't understand how the action has anything to do with the real life of the people who surround him.

If we were part of the audience which enjoyed *THE PLAY'S THE THING* when it first premiered we might have known that Molnar's constant intrigues with women often provided the playwright with material for his plays. In addition to going to the theatre to see a good play by Molnar, or even a play within a play by Molnar, the audience went to the theatre to see Molnar portray the latest account of his real love life.

One small additional note of interest concerns Molnar's choice of name for this most popular of his plays. *THE PLAY'S THE THING* is a quote from Shakespeare's

HAMLET. In *HAMLET* there is, of course, the very famous play within the play, staged by the young prince for the royal court of Denmark in an attempt to "catch the conscience of the king." Hamlet's play within the play is based on events that Hamlet believes to have happened and desires to prove true. Turai's play within a play is based on pure fantasy and is an attempt to prove true a reality that is completely false. For experienced theatre-goers the intricacy of Molnar's literary illusion is a grand part of the play's entertainment.

THE PLAY'S THE THING premiered not in Molnar's native Hungary, but in New York and Italy concurrently. The English translation by the British humorist P.G. Wodehouse opened on Broadway in November of 1926 and it was a resounding success.

Since 1926 *THE PLAY'S THE THING* has been produced regularly all over the world. Unlike many of his other plays, *THE PLAY'S THE THING* has almost no references to specific locations or customs related to European or Hungarian life. Critics have noted that this may account for the unique ability of the play to travel well over time and space. It has a universal appeal in its light comedy and easy manner.

PARTICULAR TO THIS PRODUCTION

One of Molnar's constant dramatic themes was the argument between make-believe and reality. In his serious plays this argument might take shape in the ability of one dramatic character to alter reality (as happens in *THE DEVIL*). In his play *THE SWAN*, Molnar hints at the illusions held up as reality by examining the social and class codes followed by a royal family. In *THE PLAY'S THE THING* Molnar lets go of all restraint and creates a comedy that looks squarely at the artificial nature of theatre

him to go away. In the conversation overheard by Turai, Mansky and Adam, Ilona agrees to kiss Almady in memory of their past relationship. In the face of Ilona's determination to remain faithful to Adam, Almady finally leaves her alone. But in addition to being conceited, Almady is also a coward. He is terrified of having his wife learn of his relationship with Ilona. It is to save his own marriage that Almady agrees to perform in the play that Turai writes to convince Adam that the passionate conversation he overheard was really a rehearsal.

JOHANN DWORNITSCHKEK - works in the castle resort as a sort of footman or butler. Dwornitschek has a small comic part to play in the action. He says relatively

little but observes everyone else's madness. It always seems as if he understands the punch line of all the jokes and situations before they are even completed. The funny thing about Dwornitschek is that he lets all the jokes happen without his interference. Turai is fascinated by Dwornitschek because their natures are so very different.

MELL - The castle resort where everyone is staying is actually owned by a Count not in residence. Mell is the Count's secretary and responsible for the comfort and happiness of all the guests. Just as Dwornitschek is calm, Mell is always a nervous wreck. And just as Dwornitschek understands everything that happens around him, Mell never understand anything, not even the most obvious relationships.

A FEW WORDS TO LOOK UP

This is not a complicated play and there are only a few words and references that you might want to look up before you see the play. Have fun!

prima donna

librettist

Pyramus and Thisbe

to telegraph or wire someone

recitation

cognac

operetta

vernal

altruistic

Sardou

HEDDA GABLER

prompter

Normandy

credulous