

Roundabout Theatre Company

The M O L I È R E C O M E D I E S

The School for Husbands • The Imaginary Cuckold

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NYNEX Family Series
Study Guide

The Molière Comedies

*The School for Husbands
and The Imaginary Cuckold*

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COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE and THE RULES

Do you think of plays being written based on a certain formula, almost the way cooks make casseroles and bakers make cakes? If you don't, then you should think again. Some of the greatest plays (movies and television programs also) are based on formulas that were created centuries ago. You might say, a television show based on a formula created in the 1600's, hah, no way! But you'd be wrong.

The comic situations that make us laugh today are not that different from the comic situations that made people laugh centuries ago. Of course, the clothes, the locations, the names and the appliances used, would have to be different, but the foundation is surprisingly familiar. Lovers, who cannot be married because an older caretaker gets in the way with his old-fashioned ideas, outwit that caretaker by causing his own rules to backfire on him. Certainly you've seen this type of story on your favorite situation comedy. This plot line first made audiences laugh in the theatre of ancient Rome. And this plot line has rarely been absent from popular entertainment since.

So what does this have to do with Molière? Everything. Molière stole many of his story lines from the comedies of ancient Rome. During the period in which Molière lived and worked a type of traveling theatre company called the *Commedia dell'Arte* was extremely popular. Originally from Italy, these bands of actors performed comic plays based on story lines also from ancient Rome. The stories had characters that were very similar and familiar to the audience.

Although these plays were not written but improvised in front of each audience, they followed standard scenarios, many of which are still known today. Just as the scenarios were stock or standard, so were the characters known as stock characters. Each troupe of actors had someone who would play the part

of the zanni, or clever trickster. This character could work for the hero, or be trying to undermine the villain, but he was always the cause of great comic action. Another actor would act all the parts for the elder guardian or parent, yet another would take up the role of the stupid old man who was incredibly gullible. Then there would generally have to be actors to play the young lovers (the girl was usually the daughter or ward of the guardian or parent), a maid, a jealous suitor who loses the girl, and perhaps a few extra characters to complicate the comic story a bit more.

These characters were woven into hundreds and hundreds of stories that the *commedia* troupes created for audiences on the spot. In the years that Molière's acting troupe traveled through the provinces of France they came into frequent contact with the actors of the *Commedia*. And since the *Commedia* was incredibly popular it was good business for Molière to learn a great deal from them. Once back in Paris, Molière's association with the Italian acting tradition continued, as he shared virtually every theatre with Italian companies, exchanging performance nights and material regularly.

Like the *Commedia*, Molière's plays employ stock characters. You can recognize the young lovers who must overcome the stupid old guardian in order to be together. There is the zanni, in the form of a valet, who works for one of the young lovers, or for one of the older characters. Often there is a maid and an additional older character, who is the friend of the guardian. The names of these characters in the works of Molière sometimes repeat themselves and sometimes they change. But audiences who knew his work could always recognize the character despite changes in his name or even slight changes in his nature.

In the two plays you are about to see at the Roundabout (*SCHOOL FOR HUSBANDS* and *THE IMAGINARY CUCKOLD*) Molière used the same name for the same character, Sganarelle. In both plays

Sganarelle is rigid, fearful of change, needing to be in ridiculous control of others and impossibly blind to the reality of the world around him. Molière wrote these parts for himself. Later in his career he created similar parts changing the name of the character, even changing some of his nature, but always following a certain comic formula recognizable to his audience.

One of the primary differences between the work of the Commedia dell'Arte and the plays of Molière was that the Commedia troupes improvised while Molière's actors followed his carefully structured scripts quite carefully. As mentioned earlier, a playwright depended on his authorship of a play for his income. Molière earned a substantial part of his livelihood from the performance of his plays. If they were pirated or stolen from him he would lose that income.

In concluding this description of the Commedia and its influence on the plays of Molière it is vital to repeat that any sitcom seen on television today is a direct descendant of the Commedia and the situations profiled in Molière's plays. Molière specialized in light, breezy and sometimes racy material, designed to entertain, amuse and often scandalize his audiences.

THE RULES

Around the year 1630 a number of French critics and artists began to develop a set of rules for the writing of drama. At first these rules were only supposed to suggest to playwrights how they might make their plays more effective and enjoyable for the public. But as with many rules, they slowly became more than just suggestions, they became THE RULES.

THE RULES included the three unities; that of time, action and location and the ideas of verisimilitude (realism) and decorum.

If it sounds complicated that is because it was, at least it was complicated if you tried to break THE RULES.

--Unity of time suggested that the action of the play take place within a 24 or 36 hour period.

--Unity of action pushed playwrights to limit the number of complications in the plot.

--Unity of location urged that the action take place in one locale (several rooms or a town square were acceptable.)

The idea of verisimilitude sounds really complicated but it actually means that the play should be realistic. Finally, in following a sense of decorum, playwrights were asked to keep all the really upsetting scenes, like murders and executions, offstage.

These RULES became quite strict over time and while they were applied much more completely to tragedy they did have some effect on the writing of comedy. Almost all of Molière's plays take place in one location, in a condensed period of time and the plot follows a very unified and orderly progression. Since there are rarely murders or executions in comedy, Molière did not have to worry about decorum and the whole idea of his comedy was to make fun of the real world, so verisimilitude was fairly central to all of his plays.

If you think that RULES like those used by the French are strange and distant, think about the codes used by the movie industry to viewing restrictions on certain films, or the pressure that advertising companies can exert on television programs that are controversial. It seems that every age has its RULES and it is usually helpful to know what those rules are.

troupe with plays. The company was lucky that Molière was good at writing comedy. For tragic plays they had to look elsewhere, but for comedy they became famous because of their leader and resident playwright, Molière.

It was their fame as Molière's troupe that finally brought them back to Paris to perform for King Louis XIV. In the autumn of 1658 Molière's troupe presented the tragedy *NICOMEDE* by Pierre Corneille (one of the leading serious playwrights of the day) and *THE AMOROUS DOCTOR* by Molière in the theatre of the old Louvre. Despite Corneille's popularity, his play was a failure. But Molière's small farce was such a success that it won his company a permanent theatrical home in Paris, eventually under the patronage of the King himself!

For the rest of his life Molière lived and worked in Paris leading his troupe of actors, acting, writing and managing his theatres. At first his company shared the Theatre du Petit Bourbon with a troupe of Italian actors led by the famous actor Tiberio Fiorelli. In this first theatre the Italian players were the greater attraction and so they performed on the best days of the week (Tuesday, Friday and Sunday). But soon the two companies were moved into the Theatre du Palais Royal where Molière's company of actors were given the favored position and the better performance days.

The creative pressure under which Molière labored was great. In 1665, Molière's troupe became known as "The King's Company". The King and the public expected him to produce new comedies on a regular schedule. While the favor of the King was a tremendous burden, it also brought Molière's company a great deal of attention and popularity. Molière was the best paid playwright/actor of his day.

Playwrights were paid by the actors who performed their plays for the first time. If the ticket receipts were good then the playwright received a fair amount of money. If the receipts were bad the playwright received

nothing. The playwright was never paid for subsequent productions of his plays, and so if he did not continue to turn out new material he had no income.

Molière did well financially because he was able to produce play after play, he was very popular with the public (as well as with the nobility), and because he starred in each of his comedies he drew for himself an additional salary as an actor. Molière was well known as a brilliant comic performer, quick and tireless on the stage.

IV. AS A FAMILY MAN

As everyone knows, one of the first requirements of a comedy is that it have a happy ending. Molière's plays follow that rule. But his life did not. Not only was his personal life stormy, but his professional life was filled with anxiety and controversy.

When the young Jean-Baptiste Poquelin entered the theatre in partnership with the Béjart family the union was more than just business. Molière and Madeleine Béjart, a young actress who had already established a name for herself, also entered into a romantic relationship. While Molière and Madelaine worked together until Madelaine's death in 1672, over time their relationship became less and less romantic.

In 1662 Molière married Armande Béjart, a young woman twenty years his junior and either Madelaine's sister or her daughter. Some gossips went so far as to say that Armande had been fathered by Molière. The rumors that Molière had married his own daughter circulated in Paris and brought the family great distress. In an effort to stop this cruel gossip, King Louis XIV pronounced himself godfather to Molière's first born child, to show his support for the harassed playwright.

Molière's personal misfortunes continued despite this show of support. His marriage to Armande was not a happy one. Only one of their children lived beyond infancy. Molière became increasingly concerned with

his own health as he grew older and while he continued to perform energetically on stage he felt weaker and weaker off stage.

V. AS A PUBLIC FIGURE

Despite, or perhaps because of, Molière's great popularity a number of his plays inspired vigorous public upheaval. *THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES* was considered by some to be a scandalous political argument for women's rights. The criticisms were so great and so many that Molière wrote two plays simply to reply to his critics and explain his true position. (These two plays are *THE CRITIQUE OF THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES* and *THE VERSAILLES IMPROMPTU*.) *TARTUFFE*, a play satirizing hypocrisy amongst members of the clergy, caused so much anger in the Church that it was suppressed for a number of years and then only produced in a revised version in 1670 (six years after it was first presented at court.)

These are only a few of the barbed attacks with which Molière had to deal during his time as the chief writer of comedy for France. After all, this was a period when the people, rich and poor, took their theatre very seriously. The message sent by a play could be the subject for tremendous debate and if the playwright seemed too critical of deep religious or social beliefs he could make a lot of trouble for himself. Molière made a lot of trouble for himself. In 1672 King Louis retreated from his support of Molière's theatre.

VI. AS THE GREATEST SOCIAL OUTCAST OF FRANCE

On February 17, 1673 Molière performed, as usual, the lead role in his play *THE IMAGINARY INVALID*, a play that had been running for some time. It was like any other evening at the theatre. The house was not full. Molière's friends had urged him not to perform because he had not been feeling well. But Molière insisted on playing his part in the comedy. During the performance he

became ill but he insisted on finishing the evening's entertainment. When the play was over Molière had to be carried to his home by his friends. Close to death, reports say, from exhaustion and anxiety, Molière was ready to give his last confession. Three curates (priests) were called in succession to perform the last rites but none of the three agreed to come. Finally Molière died without receiving final absolution. In modern times this might not have caused such a great problem, but in France of the 1600's this was a tragedy.

No graveyard would agree to have Molière buried in consecrated ground. As an actor Molière was considered a heretic by the 17th century Catholic Church. As a heretic he could not be accorded the rites of a good Christian. In order for an actor to be given a Christian burial he or she had to renounce their profession, promise never to practice it again, and then take final communion. Since the only curate who agreed to come to Molière on his death bed did not arrive in time, Molière died an actor, an outcast.

Desperate to have him buried, Molière's widow Armande was forced to apply to the King for special permission to have him buried in a church graveyard. The King sent a message to the Archbishop urging a quiet resolution to the issue of Molière's burial. The Archbishop relented. He allowed the body of Molière to be buried, but the ceremony had to take place at night, with only two curates attending, and without ceremony. Molière's body was interred in a grave that lay with paupers and years later the marker was disturbed causing the exact location of his remains to be lost.

Molière's company of actors ceased performing for several days to honor his death. But then they took up his plays and continued his work under the leadership of his widow. Not long after, his company was moved yet again to the Theatre Guengaud, a location also shared with a troupe of Italian actors.

VII. AS A LEGEND

Molière's company served as the basis for what became in 1680 the Comédie Française, the national theatre of France which is still in existence today.

During his life Molière wrote over 30 plays. In each there was a part for each member of his theatrical family, including his wife and himself. And while Molière was one of the most popular playwrights of his day, it has taken centuries to demonstrate the enduring stature of his work. The plays of Molière continue to be performed on stages all over the world to this very day.

MORE ON THE PLAYS AND THE CHARACTERS

SGANARELLE, or THE IMAGINARY CUCKOLD, was first performed in May of 1660. In its first production it had an unusually long run of 34 performances, and it was the most frequently performed of Molière's plays during his lifetime. One audience member was so fond of this particular play that he attended it again and again until he had the whole script memorized. Hoping to make a profit from his skill at memorization, he then contacted a publisher and offered him the script for print and sale. Molière was lucky to hear of this pirated version of the play in time to make a special financial agreement with the publisher.

While Molière set this play in the city of Paris, Michael Langham has decided to move the action to a small "hick" town somewhere in the provinces of France in the 1600's. *THE IMAGINARY CUCKOLD* is filled with characters of great innocence and gullibility. How could these simple, honest folk live in a big sophisticated city, filled with corruption and double dealing? Mr. Langham felt they couldn't, and that is why he moved

them to a place where their personalities fit into the landscape.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

GORGIBUS - a middle aged man with a marriageable daughter. He is very eager to have her make the best financial match possible. Years ago he had promised that she could marry a young fellow named Lelie. His daughter, Celie, and Lelie have long been in love, so this agreement has been acceptable to them. At the beginning of the play it seems that Gorgibus has changed his mind and has arranged to have Celie marry someone else.

CELIE - Gorgibus' daughter is furious at her father for attempting to stop her from marrying Lelie. Then when Celie thinks, incorrectly, that Lelie has been unfaithful to her, she agrees to marry Valere, the new man her father has chosen for her.

LELIE - the young man who expects to marry Celie. He is also furious when he discovers that his plans to marry Celie are threatened. Then, when he mistakenly thinks that Celie has already married Sganarelle he becomes almost violent.

GROS-RENE - Lelie's valet, the man who takes care of his horse, food and lodging. This is a smart young man who cares about Lelie but cares more about his own stomach and comfort.

SGANARELLE - another middle aged man living in the same town as all these other people. He is married and mistakenly believes that his wife is having an affair with Lelie. He is full of sound and fury and determined to avenge his honor. The trouble is that he is also a coward and cannot summon the courage to attack Lelie

SGANARELLE'S WIFE - around the same age as her husband, this is a good hearted woman who is mistakenly fooled into

thinking that Sganarelle is being unfaithful to her with the young Celie. Extremely hurt and angry she doesn't know what to do to avenge herself on Sganarelle.

VILLEBREQUIN - the father of Valere, the man Celie's father wanted her to marry instead of Lelie. At the very end of the play Villebrequin enters and announces that Valere has been secretly married to someone else and cannot marry Celie. (Valere never appears in the action of the play.)

THE SCHOOL FOR HUSBANDS appeared in 1661, just one year after *THE IMAGINARY CUCKOLD*. In it Molière once again features the short sighted and inflexible character of Sganarelle. In both cases Sganarelle is the central post around which the comedy of the plays revolve. But in this second play Sganarelle has grown from an innocent blunderer to a bull-headed spoiler and crank. This is an excellent example of how Molière used the basic form of the Commedia's stock characters yet made them his own creations, creations that developed and grew over time and from play to play.

Molière wrote the part of Sganarelle for himself. He was brilliant at playing this kind of comedy just as he excelled at its creation. In some ways Molière might remind one of Woody Allen, who also has based his career on playing a comic figure of his own invention.

Molière followed *THE SCHOOL FOR HUSBANDS* with a companion piece entitled *THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES*. This second play caused a tremendous uproar in Paris because the public and the nobility felt that Molière was advocating a radical type of feminism. Actually these two plays are quite similar. Do you think that Molière was a radical feminist? Is the character of Isabelle liberated from the rules of her culture?

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

SGANARELLE - a rigid, opinionated and fearful middle aged man who believes that he

can make a woman into an obedient robot by limiting her freedom. Isabelle is the young woman Sganarelle is educating to become his wife. He wants her to be quiet, economical and agreeable to all his opinions. To that end he keeps her shut away and restricts her contact with all people including her sister, Leonor.

ARISTE - Sganarelle's older brother, and almost his exact opposite in nature. Ariste believes that in educating the young, one can only guide them in their choices. He insists that if you imprison a spirit you will lose the soul of a person. Leonor is the young woman Ariste has taken the responsibility for educating with the hope that she will choose to marry him. He gives her freedom to come and go as she wishes and to learn what she can of life and the world at large.

ISABELLE - Sganarelle's wife-to-be and the sister of Leonor. Isabelle is obsessed by planning her escape from Sganarelle. She is a bright, resourceful young woman who normally has great respect for the proper rules of society; but her extreme situation forces her to step beyond the rules governing the behavior of respectable young women. It is Isabelle who master-minds her own elopement with Valere, using Sganarelle as the knowing go-between.

LEONOR - Ariste's wife-to-be and the sister of Isabelle. Leonor thinks that Sganarelle is a monster and tries to tell him that Isabelle could never love a man who keeps her prisoner. Leonor enjoys the freedom that Ariste allows her but she finds all the young men she meets boring and self-absorbed.

VALERE - the young man who falls in love with Isabelle from a distance. Valere is an honest and trustworthy fellow but he depends on Isabelle to make the plan that will lead to their wedding.

ERGASTE - Valere's valet, he takes care of

Valere. Ergaste is brighter than his employer and understands the messages sent to Valere by Isabelle through Sganarelle. Without Ergaste, the plans for Valere and Isabelle's marriage might not have proven successful.

NOTES FROM THE DIRECTOR:

Michael Langham

When Michael Langham was 18 years old he was a British soldier fighting the Germans in World War II. He was captured and put into a prisoner of war camp where he was held captive for five years. For the first two years of his captivity the young Mr. Langham did everything in his power to escape. He dug tunnels, clipped fences, and finally realized that his efforts to escape were useless.

For the next three years Mr. Langham kept himself busy, and kept his fellow prisoners entertained, by putting on plays. The actors were his pals and his audience was guaranteed. During those three years Mr. Langham learned how helpful a theatre experience could be. Many of his friends got very depressed during their captivity; having a play to see at the end of a day was often the only thing that kept them going. This experience convinced Mr. Langham that if he was ever released from captivity, he would give up his earlier ambition to be a lawyer and enter the theatre where he could create dramatic experiences that might change people's lives for the better. (It is interesting to note that both Mr. Langham and Molière gave up careers practicing law to enter the theatre!)

After the war, Mr. Langham returned to his home in Scotland and he was fortunate to be offered a job directing in a small theatre in the English city of Coventry. He ran to Coventry for that job and has been working in the theatre as a director ever since.

Discussing *THE IMAGINARY CUCKOLD* and *THE SCHOOL FOR HUSBANDS*, Mr. Langham offers us a clue to

Molière's comic style. Obsession is a central component of all the characters in these plays, according to Mr. Langham. Sganarelle is obsessed by the fear of losing control, Ariste is obsessed by being open and free, Gorgibus is obsessed by money and protecting his reputation, Leonor is obsessed by obtaining her freedom without losing her reputation.

Mr. Langham says that if you can identify the character's obsession, you can understand the character and the direction of the comedy. (It's sort of like watching a basketball game.) For instance, Sganarelle's obsession with control is contrasted with his brother Ariste's obsession with giving up control and Leonor's obsession with destroying Sganarelle's control. Because each character's obsession is inflexible, and in direct conflict with someone else's obsession, the comedy is similar to watching the Marx Brothers drive each other crazy in the process of getting what they want from a situation. The antics of the characters spurred on by their obsessions lead us to discover whose obsession wins in the end.

According to Mr. Langham, working on a play by a dead author can be very frustrating because the playwright is not around to answer questions and help resolve the problems that come up in rehearsal. Luckily Richard Wilbur, the man who has translated these plays from French to English, is on hand to help with the script.

The translator of a play is often a playwright himself. In this case Mr. Wilbur is a fine artist and his goal has been to convey the beauty and meaning of Molière's plays while creating language that is simple and pleasurable for the actors to speak and easy for the audience to understand.

One of the first things you will notice about the Molière plays is that they are written in verse. Mr. Langham cautions you, the audience, not to get too involved in the rhymes. The French are quite used to the poetry of the language and don't even notice the rhymes half the time. The wonderful thing about listening to the characters of

Molière is that their language is clear and to the point.

Molière placed both *THE IMAGINARY CUCKOLD* and *THE SCHOOL FOR HUSBANDS* in the very sophisticated society of Paris. But Mr. Langham has chosen to place *THE IMAGINARY CUCKOLD* in a small poky sort of town, where the people are not quite as sophisticated as city folks. He felt that this play would contrast more sharply and comically with *THE SCHOOL FOR HUSBANDS* which does involve city sophisticates and snobs.

As of the writing of this article *THE SCHOOL FOR HUSBANDS* will be the first part of the show and *THE IMAGINARY CUCKOLD* will come after the intermission. Mr. Langham is still not sure which order will be most effective for the audience. After you have seen the whole show it will be interesting to hear what you think about which play should go first.