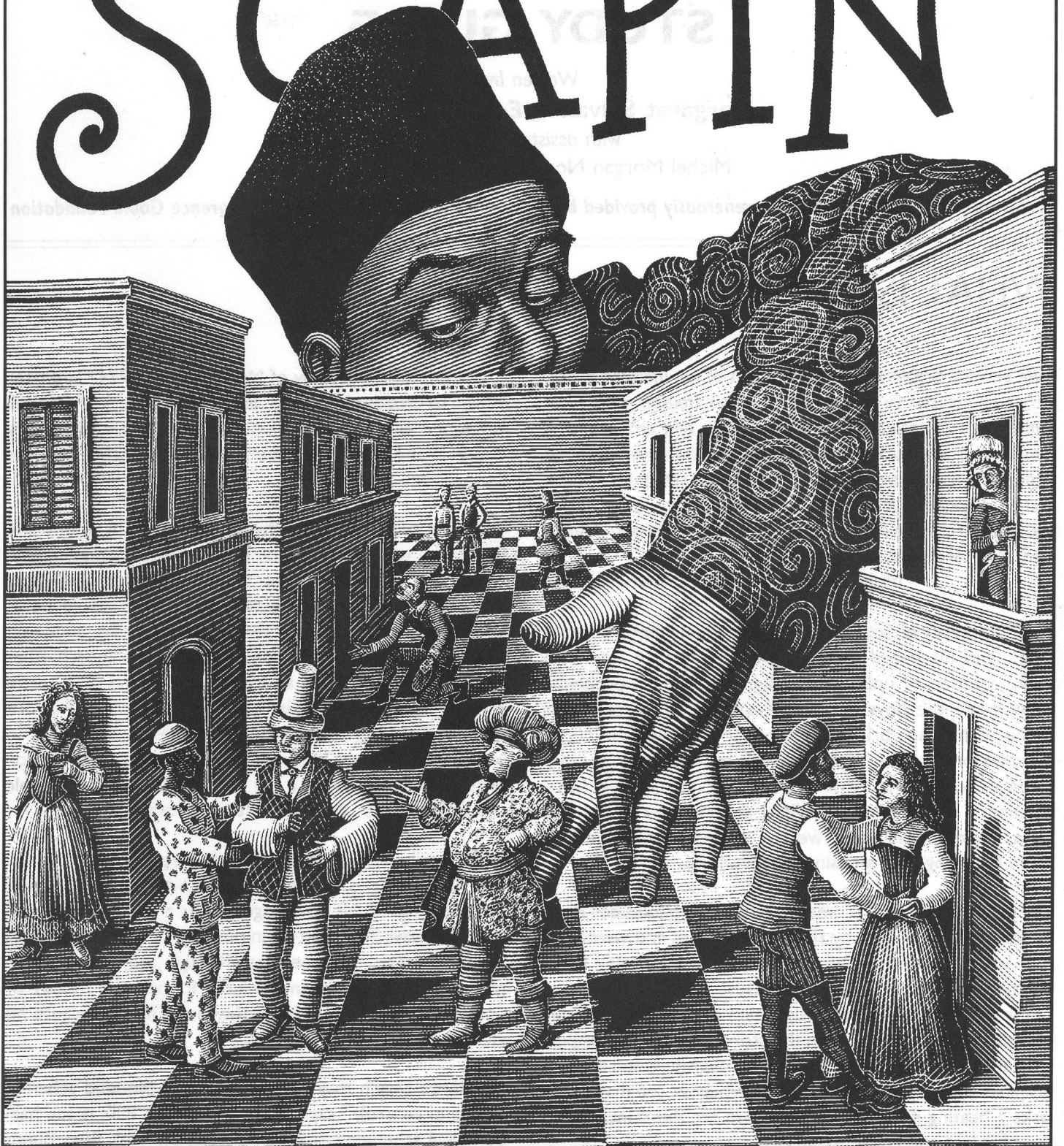


Roundabout Theatre Company

SCAPIN



The Chase Family Series Study Guide

SCAPIN

A Comedy by Molière

Adapted by Bill Irwin and Mark O'Donnell

STUDY GUIDE

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WHAT IS THE PLAY ABOUT?

"The servant Scapin sneaks gingerly out of his master's house. He's embarrassed by the baggy cut of his trousers. He fears running into the gendarmes eager to detain him on account of some recent bamboozling. He worries the audience won't last through the knotty stretches of exposition that set up his plotting. And he is poised to launch into a bowlegged soft-shoe whenever there's some creative scammery afoot. Scapin, meet post-modern vaudeville. And Molière, meet Bill Irwin."

- Misha Berson, *American Theatre Magazine*

The story of *Scapin* involves two young men, Leander and his friend Octave, who fall in love with two women of unknown background. Their problems begin when the boys discover their fathers are returning home with other brides for their sons. With the family fortunes on the line, it is Leander's servant, Scapin, who steps in to foil the fathers' plans and ensure the boys' happiness. While the fast talking servant may not always make the right decisions, we find him to be an imperfect, often bumbling, but amusingly likable hero.

The character of Scapin comes from the Commedia dell'Arte. Molière was fascinated by the tricky servant and wrote the play *Scapin* in which he also starred. It is a romping farce, written quickly to fill a gap in a season. Much of the humor of the piece comes from the dynamics of the typical master/servant relationship we see in this story. Even though Scapin's master has the supposed authority, through guile and trickery Scapin is able to gain the advantage. When we see that Scapin risks a beating if his trickery fails, we are more inclined to root for him and enjoy his success.

The first American production of *Scapin* - called *Scapino* - was adapted and performed by Jim Dale. It was presented

at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in May, 1974, and later moved to Broadway. In 1995, Bill Irwin and Mark O'Donnell developed an adaptation of the play at Seattle Repertory Theatre and have reworked their adaptation for the Roundabout production.

Molière's play has been "freely adapted" by Irwin and O'Donnell to give it a contemporary edge. Beginning with a word for word translation from Molière's original text, their challenge was to create a script that would be as accessible to us as Molière's version was for his audience. At its heart is a story about people trying to find each other and be together. On its surface is a parody of the theatre itself. The characters exist both in the story and in our theatre. They beg us to pay attention to the exposition so we will get the jokes later on. They comment on the action as it unfolds and make a big fuss about the unbelievable coincidences that allow their story to resolve.

In this production we recognize Scapin's preoccupation with the vulnerabilities of others and his ability to use their shortcomings to his advantage. He is a student of human nature, always finding an ingenious answer to the challenges set before him. We see that although Scapin delights in playing tricks, he doesn't swindle for sake of money or personal gain. He does it for the fun of it and because his victims deserve what they get.

"Molière's Scapin may have been a cold-blooded schemer always in control," says Mark O'Donnell. "Bill's is the half-bumbling schemer just barely getting by. He's Bugs Bunny in a world of Elmer Fudds. And I think he exists in a realm where his tricks are in good fun, not a form of maliciousness. These days, that's awfully rare and very refreshing."

WHO'S WHO

Scapin (played by Bill Irwin): A shrewd servant who contrives schemes and plots to manipulate the other characters in the story relying on his wits to advance his position. Using a combination of fast-talking jargon and imaginative situations, Scapin unfolds the drama in hilarious and inventive ways.

Geronte (played by Gerry Vichi): Scapin's spendthrift master and Leander's father who has recently sent for his daughter from Toronto for an arranged marriage.

Leander (played by Jonathan Wade): The lovesick son of Geronte who elicits Scapin's help to free his love from the gypsies.

Zerbinette (played by Marina Chapa): A young girl who was kidnapped by the gypsies at a very young age and who is the object of Leander's affections.

Georgel/Organist (played by Bruce Hurlbut): The on-stage organist who provides musical underscoring for the show as well as being a foil for Scapin, highlighting dramatic and comic moments in the play.



Costume Sketches for Octave by Victoria Petrovich

Argante (played by Count Stovall): The rich, penny-pinching master of Sylvestre and father of Octave who has arranged a marriage for his son to the daughter of Geronte.

Sylvestre (played by Christopher Evan Welch): The servant of Argante and Scapin's sidekick. Together, Scapin and Sylvestre invent and execute the twists and turns that eventually lead to the plays hilarious outcome.

Octave (played by Maduka Steady): Argante's son who fears his father's authority but wishes to make his own decisions in life and therefore elicits the help of Scapin.

Hyacinth (played by Kristin Chenoweth): A young, sensitive girl with a mysterious background who is secretly married to Octave.

Nerine (played by Mary Bond Davis): Hyacinth's hand maid who wanders the city looking for an elusive Signor Pandolphe that no one seems to know.

Gendarmes/Porters (played by Hillel Meltzer and Sean Rector): Costumed clowns who perform a variety of characters and gags to keep the play going.



Costume Sketches for Zerbinette by Victoria Petrovich

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Molière (Jean-Baptist Poquelin), 1622 - 1673.

Molière is known to us as one of the greatest comic dramatists in the history of the European theatre. He is the "Shakespeare of France" whose work established a pattern that would endure for 300 years. In his day Molière was also a brilliant director and performer. To his audience and the court of Louis XIV he was known as "The King of Laughter," France's foremost actor of farce.

Molière was named Jean-Baptiste Poquelin by his parents who expected him to follow the family tradition and become an upholsterer. But, at a young age, he was introduced to the theatre by his grandfather and went often to see the traditional stories and characters of the French popular theatre. The experience had a profound effect on him. He continued with school, went to college and even earned a license to practice law. But, when the time came to start his career, Jean-Baptiste left home and took up with a family of actors. With them he started a company called the Illustre-Théâtre in an abandoned tennis court and took the stage name of Molière.

Like many young artist today, Molière's theatre career was a struggle at first. The only audience at his first performance were the non-paying friends and relatives of company members. It didn't take long before he was arrested for debt and forced to leave Paris. But after almost 15 years of touring the provinces Molière established a reputation for himself and returned to Paris triumphantly, eventually attaining the highest honor as director of "The King's Company" and performing his plays for Louis XIV at Versailles.

A renowned observer of human nature, Molière's plays stress the social nature of man. His genius was in finding the humor in the social and personal relationships we all experience in some way. We recognize ourselves, our relatives and our communities in his characters and because of the goodheartedness of his satire, we can laugh at what we see in his mirror.

PRINCIPLE WORKS

- The Bungler* - 1653
- The Amorous Quarrel* - 1656
- The Amorous Doctor* - 1658
- The Precious Ladies Ridiculed* - 1659
- Sganarelle, or the Imaginary Cuckold* - 1660
- Don Garcia of Navarre, or the Jealous Prince* - 1661
- The School for Husbands* - 1661
- The School for Wives* - 1662
- The Critique of The School for Wives* - 1663
- The Forced Marriage* - 1664
- The Princess of Elis* - 1664
- Tartuffe (The Imposter)* - 1664
- Don Juan, or the Stone Feast* - 1665
- Love, the Doctor* - 1665
- The Misanthrope* - 1666
- The Doctor in Spite of Himself* - 1666
- Mélicerte* - 1666
- The Sicilian, or Love the Painter* - 1667
- Amphitryon* - 1668
- George Dandin, or the Baffled Husband* - 1668
- The Miser* - 1668
- Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* - 1669
- The Magnificent Lovers* - 1670
- The Would-Be Gentleman* - 1670
- Pysche (with Corneille and Quinault)* - 1671
- The Swindles of Scapin* - 1671
- The Learned Ladies* - 1672
- The Imaginary Invalid* - 1673



Molière in the costume of Sganarelle

No more clowning around

With *Scapin*, Bill Irwin gets serious—well, sort of By Peter Wells

Even people who don't like clowns like Bill Irwin. He is not a member of the size-45-shoe, bulbous-red-nose, reach-into-my-pocket-little-boy-and-you'll-find-some-candy school of clowning. He is a direct descendant of Buster Keaton, who turned his running argument with the physical world into high art.

At the beginning of *Fool Moon*, an evening of silent clowning with David Shiner that has now had two successful Broadway runs, Irwin had a delicious encounter with a microphone. While Shiner was out tormenting the audience, Irwin was getting himself deeper into trouble with the microphone's cord until he was dangling upside-down above the stage. But Irwin's new project is something different: an adaptation of Molière's farce *Scapin*. He directs and plays the lead, a scheming servant. "This guy almost never shuts up," he says. "He's such a chameleon, he's not sure who he is."

If all goes as planned, Irwin will accomplish his trickiest stunt yet, which he refers to as "kicking out of the Silent Clown Ghetto." In *Scapin*, which combines commedia dell'arte farce with verbal comedy, Irwin feels he has found the ideal bus in which to make his escape from the old neighborhood. "It's like doing—well, I won't compare it to an opera role, since I don't know anything about opera," he says. "I'll just say it's like playing for the Mets."

Keaton was a clown before he was old enough to know what that meant. His father used him in his vaudeville act as a prop, mopping the stage with his body and so on. Irwin says *his* father was "too nice a guy" to use him in that way; besides, his dad's job in the aerospace industry didn't exactly call for it. But Irwin knew from childhood that he wanted to be on the stage. When he began to study acting, he discovered that physical comedy held a powerful attraction for him.

In the '80s, Irwin and some other performers formed the renowned Pickle Family Circus in San Francisco. Around that time, Irwin and like-minded clowns began to be grouped together as a movement called the New Vaudeville. "I was never too fond of that label," he says, but it did help him gain recognition and land at least one great role.



In 1988, Lincoln Center cast him in a clown-dominated production of *Waiting for Godot*, alongside Robin Williams and Steve Martin.

His version of *Scapin* includes a great deal of physical comedy as well. "It's much more vaudeville than *Tartuffe* and *The Misanthrope*," he says. "In many ways, Molière's satirical target here was theater itself." Irwin's adaptation, prepared in collusion with humorist Mark O'Donnell, is an "homage to Molière," he says. They have taken a few liberties, on the theory that "sometimes the best way to be true to a play is by taking a flier from it." As in, for example, a recurring song-and-dance number called "The Schemer's Boogie." Irwin insists the bit was inserted in good faith: "I'm sure Molière would have written it, if he'd thought of it."

Previews for *Scapin* begin at the Roundabout Theater December 4. It opens December 24.

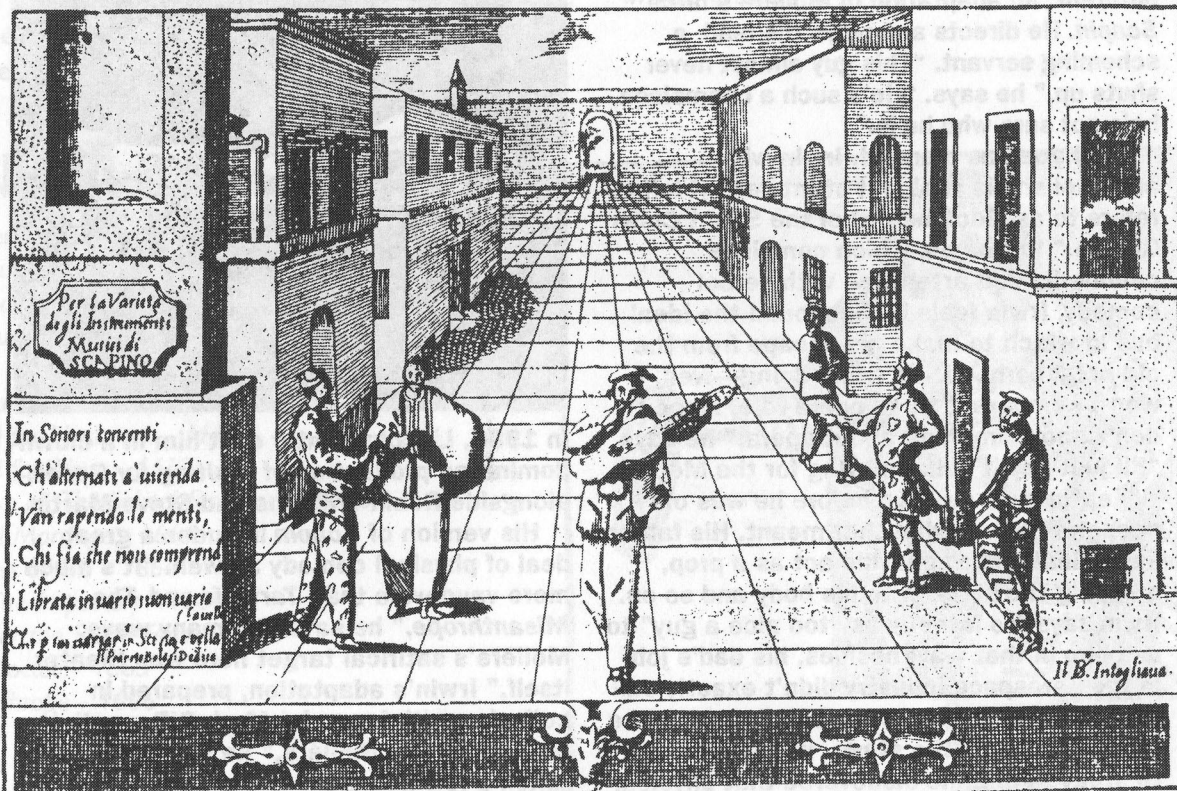
INSPIRATION

In Paris, Molière shared the theatre at Petit-Bourbon with a Commedia dell'Arte company from Italy. The two companies performed on alternate nights and for years had the opportunity to observe each other's work. This competition kept Molière on his toes and tested his writing, directing and acting skills, reinforcing the need for simplicity and spontaneity in his work.

Molière helped himself to comic conventions, characters and scenarios of the theatre he saw all around him. His work is a brilliant blend of Commedia dell'Arte, French farce and classic Roman comedy. He borrowed so liberally in fact that his contemporaries complained of plagiarism. His famous defense to their accusations was simply, "I take what belongs to me wherever I find it."

Commedia dell'Arte

It is from the roots of Commedia dell'Arte that much of modern comedy springs. First developed in Italy and prominent throughout the Renaissance, Commedia performances were comprised of a well known repertory of characters that remained the same regardless of the scenario they played in. Servants such as Harlequin, Scaramouche and Scapin, masters such as Pantalone, The Doctor, and The Captain each had their own distinctive characteristics with corresponding costumes and masks. The actors were well trained in their particular character, having a plethora of routines and jokes to pull from, relying on improvisation, physical humor and outlandish gestures to supply the 'meat' of their material.



This illustration of a typical Commedia setting became the inspiration for Douglas Stein's set design for Scapin.

Farce

There is a fine line that divides comedy and farce. Where comedy derives its humor from character studies, farce focuses on the physical activity on stage. Usually in a farce, there are inexplicable coincidences, errors of identity, furtive secrets, and a climactic chase. These elements combine to give farce the sensation of madness, bordering on the edge of a catastrophe. Although closely knit with satire, which attempts to be socially critical, farce aims simply to make us laugh. Its usual subjects are marriage, the army, law, politicians and anybody of rank and title, for in farce, nothing is sacred.

POST-MODERN VAUDEVILLE

The challenge for Bill Irwin in performing Scapin is to portray a character who is thinking on his feet. How does he react to events as they unfold? How does he counter when faced with an obstacle? When does he realize his trick has succeeded or failed? To achieve his comic performance, Irwin uses many of the same techniques Molière did when he performed Scapin - the imitation, exaggeration, duplication, interaction with the audience and spontaneity he learned from the Commedia.

The ingredients of the Commedia have been as much of an inspiration for Bill Irwin as they were for Molière because they are still with us. The acting companies of the 16th and 17th century that toured Europe, unhindered by boundary or culture, left a legacy that has filtered down through the ages. Not only did their characters invade the literature and theatre of much of Western Europe and inspire the likes of Shakespeare and Molière, but their performance techniques were also handed down from one generation to the next. Picked up by the Pantomime of the 18th century, they were passed on to the Musical Hall and Vaudeville of the 19th century and delivered to the 20th Century via the clowns of the silent films.

Each generation has reinvented the form to fit its own age. As a child, Irwin watched the comedians of early television who carried on the techniques they had learned from the Vaudevillians. "I watched a lot of cartoons, too, and often there were cartoon characters based on entertainers whom I knew nothing about but ended up imitating," he says. "It's all part of our cultural memory." Irwin feels an affinity with Molière because he is involved in essentially the same process, looking for the spark that connects these ancient comic gags with the sensibilities of a contemporary audience.

ACTIVITIES

1. Rent a Charlie Chaplin movie, a Bugs Bunny cartoon and an episode of "The Simpsons" from the video store. Watch all three and compare them. Notice how each uses the elements of music, timing, exaggeration, imitation and dilemma to add to the humor of the story. Notice also how the stock characters have been reinterpreted by each in relation to their time. For example Charlie, Bugs and Bart are all tricksters but Charlie is a tramp, Bugs is a rabbit and Bart is a little boy. What other character types do you see and how are they reinterpreted by each generation?

2. Before you see the play consider the following questions: What are some examples of characters from plays, movies or TV shows that you have seen that are exaggerations of character types from today's society? What is funny about them? How do we know that it is all right to laugh at the misfortunes of the characters in these stories? Do we sympathize with them as we laugh? What is the difference between parody and mockery? What are some examples from today's society where the joke is taken too far?

3. As you watch the play consider the following questions: How do the costumes reflect aspects of each character's personality? How has the set designer provided opportunities for humor within the scenery? How does the music contribute to the humor? What situations, characters, jokes or bits of business might have been added to the play by Irwin and O'Donnell to give the production a contemporary edge? With whom do you sympathize and why?

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