Jason Henning • Photo by Gary Isaacs

SCAPIN *or the* CONartist

May 8 - June 7 • The Stage Theatre

"SCAPIN: *Let's be candid. I'm quite a guy. Almost nothing is impossible when I put my hand in. I have been, as it were, divinely blessed. Subterfuge, artifice deception—things which the vulgar call 'scams'—I can say with neither vanity nor humility: I am the Master.*"

—Molière/Nagle Jackson. *Scapin*, p. 3.

Originally played by Molière himself in 1671, *Scapin* is a hilarious *tour de force* about a charming but mischievous servant's efforts to unite two love-struck young men with the objects of their affections. Scapin, a clown and con man, uses mischief and machination to trick the youths' penny-pinching fathers out of money the sons need to support their lovers and proves that while the course of true love never did run smooth, paybacks can be satisfying and wildly funny.

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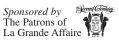
"The business of comedy is to represent in general all the defects of mankind."

– Molière, *The Impromptu of Versailles*, (1663)

MOLIÈRE (Jean *Baptiste* POQUELIN)

Jean Baptiste Poquelin was born in Paris in 1622, the eldest of six children of a well-to-do middle class family. His father held a position as an upholsterer to King Louis XIII. Jean attended the Jesuit College of Clermont, a fine secondary school for children of the rich and noble. He received a classical education, studying dramas by Terence and Plautus. He was also exposed to the theatre by his grandfather, who took him to productions at the Hotel de Bourgogne. He briefly studied law until he inherited his father's position in 1642. He renounced the position and its right of succession for a theatrical career.

In 1644, he adopted the name Molière and formed "The Illustrious Theatre" with actress Madeleine Béjart, his leading lady, business partner and mistress. He acted, served as director and stage manager. The company toured the provinces, but soon went bankrupt. Rescued from debtors' prison by his father, Molière continued a theatrical career with a newly-organized troupe and toured the provinces for the next 13 years.

On his return to Paris in 1658, Molière premiered one of his plays, *The Amorous Quarrel.* Well received by audiences, especially the young King Louis XIV, Molière stretched even farther into social commentary with *The Precious Damsels* the next year.

This biting satire on upper class manners was the first of many to enrage the Church and the aristocracy. Molière had learned during the long years in the provinces how to fuse the jokes, gestures and comic situations so loved by the rural audiences into the strictures of formal urban theatre. His writing ability elevated the farce to great literature and gained him the favor of Louis XIV, who, in 1661, installed him in the premier theatre of the kingdom, the Théâtre du Palais Royal.

In 1652, at age 40, he married Armande Béjart, 20 years his junior and the sister of his former mistress, Madeleine. This unhappy marriage was often the subject of his plays, with *The School for Wives* (1662) only leading the parade.

His most controversial play, *Tartuffe* (1664), infuriated the Church, although the king enjoyed the relentless attack on religious hypocrisy. Deemed sacrilegious by the Archbishop of Paris, the king was forced to ban the play for five years while Molière rewrote it. In 1669, it was publicly performed in its new incarnation and won great public praise. In 1671, he wrote an elaborate masque that lost money. To recoup his losses he quickly wrote the knockabout farce *Scapin* that turned out to be a far cry from the success he had hoped it would be.

While revising *Tartuffe*, Molière wrote and staged other plays, including *The Miser* (1668). He continued his barbed thrusts at the Church and included the aristocracy and the medical profession for good measure. Ceaseless criticism of his work, his unhappy marriage and a demanding work schedule took its toll. His final play, *The Imaginary Invalid*, in which he played a hypochondriac, led to his death. He suffered a lung hemorrhage during the fourth performance of the play and died the evening of February 17, 1673. The Church refused to allow Molière the last rites of burial in consecrated ground, but Louis XIV intervened and arranged the burial in a parish cemetery.

The Age *of* MOLIÈRE

Molière's lifetime (1622-1673) embraces only a fraction of the period known as "The Age of Louis XIV." This period of French history is characterized by a search for regularity, order and decorum, following the turmoil of the prior half century. New cultural institutions emerged that reflected a sense of formal, regulated and controlled standards unlike any seen in Europe before.

The most structured institutions were the official academies established under royal patronage. These academies, whose pedigrees went back to Platonic times, set standards for artistic creations under the close supervision of royal overseers. The French Academy was founded in 1635 by Richelieu to uphold classical drama. The Royal Academies of Painting and Sculpture, Architecture, and Inscriptions and Literature followed over the next 35 years. Not until the Impressionists attacked the strict conventions of the academies in the late 19th century was their authority deeply challenged.

Alongside the formal academies, a second institution developed, that of the salon. While artists of all types have frequently united to share common interests, especially where rich and noble patrons have given them encouragement, a special version of these coteries developed in 17th-century France. Groups of artists began to meet in small, intimate gatherings in the drawing room or salon of rich aristocrats' wives. These sponsoring women were often ambitious and intelligent, and they sought to attract the most brilliant artistic minds of their time. The artist came seeking patronage and fame. The rise of Paris as the cultural and political center of the nation was mirrored in the competitive society of the salon.

The intimate nature of the salon encouraged a shift to a more genteel view of the world, in contrast to the heroic ideals of the early century. The aristocrats and artists circulated through the twin cultural centers of the court and the salons. Members of an increasingly literate nobility vied with one another to provide patronage to those artists in current favor.

The growing urban nature of Paris also provided a wider audience for creativity. Theatres, opera houses and publishers made it possible to pursue a more popular audience, but patronage remained the most predictable route to financial success for the majority of artists. The reliance on the good will of the nobility tended to restrict the range of aesthetically-acceptable expression of the age.

Louis XIV was crowned king in 1654, although he had technically inherited the crown in 1643 at the age of five when his father, Louis XIII, died. Self-titled, "The Sun King," Louis XIV governed as an absolute monarch under the doctrine, "*L'état, c'est moi*" ("I am the state"). The opulence of his rule included the conversion of a small country castle into the palace at Versailles, the largest building in Europe. At Versailles, he forced the nobility into subservient roles, justifying his supremacy on the old political concept of the divine right of kings.

While his overall accomplishments made France the envy of Europe, the Sun King's last years were marked by the ruination of war and famine. These problems marked the end of an era for the lower classes, with brighter prospects ahead in the 18th century.

MOLIÈRE *and the* Principles *of* NEOCLASSIC Theatre

Molière's plays adhered to many of the standards of French Neoclassic drama. These standards were a synthesis of ideas expressed through centuries of dramatic writing.

The concept of verisimilitude or the "appearance of truth" was a key standard. This requirement ruled out fantasy and supernatural occurrences. Soliloquies and choruses were discouraged on the grounds that it was unnatural for characters to speak aloud while alone. Instead, each main character would have a trusted companion on stage to whom he could reveal his innermost secrets. In addition, violence happened off-stage because of the difficulty of making it convincingly realistic.

The dramatist was also asked to teach moral lessons. He could copy life, but he had to reveal inner moral patterns. Wickedness had to be punished and goodness rewarded. All characters were expected to be reasonably "normal" men and women, and not too deviant in any direction.

Tragedy and comedy, following the analysis developed by Plato, had their own patterns. Tragedy told stories based on the experiences of rulers of the nobility. Its endings were always unhappy in the description of the difficult affairs of the state and the downfall of its rulers. The style was lofty and poetic. Comedy, however, dealt with the private affairs of the lower classes. The endings were always happy and the style was characterized by the use of ordinary speech.

Plays were divided into five acts written around the concept of unity of action, place and time. Thus, only one location could be depicted unless another could be logically reached within a day's journey; this represented the allotted time frame for a play. Subplots were not written into the scripts.

Molière stretched several of these strictures. By writing social commentary in an biting, satirical and comical style, he constantly risked both artistic failure and personal harm. Comedy, while seen as an inferior theatrical art form, provided him an opportunity to fuse elements of the comedy of manners, French farce and *Commedia dell'Arte*.

Influences *on* MOLIÈRE

One of the most important stylistic influences on Molière was the Italian theatrical tradition composed of two elements: the *Commedia Erudita* and the *Commedia dell'Arte. Commedia Erudita*, Italian literary comedy, was so named because it was originated by humanistic writers in the late-15th and early-16th centuries who imitated or adapted the plays of Plautus and Terence, two Roman-era writers.

The plays were carefully structured to fill five acts and were written at a high level of erudition to please Italian academies and courts. As a result, they did not reach a wide theatrical audience. The plots of intrigue usually revolved around ardent young men seeking to win the girls they love despite the objections of their fathers, usually stern and miserly old men. To this end they are aided by crafty servants who use disguise, eavesdropping, impersonation and other forms of trickery. (This is the plot of Terence's play *Pharmio* from which Molière borrowed.) Later in the century new themes and situations were introduced and literary style assumed greater importance.

The *Commedia Erudita* was important because it discovered a rich source in Roman literature and presented ancient comic themes with new vigor and vitality. In contrast, *Commedia dell'Arte* was improvised comedy performed by various troupes of highly-professional Italian actors who toured Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. The troupes varied between ten and 20 in number, and their plays were usually based on a set of widely-known types. They operated within a varying scenario to which the actors brought a repertoire of jokes, acrobatic feats, set speeches and comic business.

Some scenarios came from the literature of the *Commedia Erudita,* but most of the plots of *Commedia dell'Arte* were based on love intrigues involving people of all ages: masters and servants, mistresses and confidantes. Each actor would specialize in a particular role: the aged, avaricious and amorous Pantalone: the fat and pedantic black-clad Doctor; the vainglorious and cowardly Spanish Captain with the bristling mustache; the shy and acrobatic servant Arlecchino; the deceitful, crook-nosed, artistic Brighella; the young, unmasked, handsome lovers, and a variety of *zanni*, servant figures, instantly recognizable to the audience. Plot and dialogue were often improvised after a basic rehearsal. Improvisation was important because performances could be adapted to local and contemporary needs. The success of a play depended largely upon the comic ingenuity of the performers and included mime, farce, clownish buffoonery and music in its presentation.

Another influence on Molière was farce, probably the most consistently popular form of drama. It has existed since the Greek plays through *Commedia dell'Arte* to 19th-century French farce and contemporary comedy. In farce, characters are subjected to various forms of indignity. They find themselves in compromising situations, lose items of clothing and/or suffer physical assault. They do not, however, suffer too heavily either physically or from loss of face.

The characters of farce often have a curious childish innocence, a lack of awareness of other people's concerns and a total obsession with their own. We laugh at them while envying their capacity to ignore the hurts of life. They overcome indignity and chance, but chaos is close and the game is to avert every threat. Thus farce moves quickly. The characters are like jugglers and the situations grow even more complicated. There is not time for deep analysis. Farce depends on our awareness of problems of authority, sexuality and disorder, even while the play pretends to conjure them away.

Molière used elements of farce and the presentational form of *Commedia dell'Arte* to identify problems with the aristocracy, politicians, the medical profession, religious hypocrisy and society in general. His originality consisted in making great theatre of farcical theatre. Instead of using the device of a complicated plot, Molière started off with certain fixed masks and made them into human beings by adding to them characteristics observed in contemporary life. This "character comedy" genre presents individual characters, each with a spectacle of inner forces that seek to dominate or protect themselves with such extreme persistence that it becomes comical. Molière's protagonists are egotists who invent illusory values to satisfy their appetites. The humor arises as they deceive themselves and become dupes of their own natures.

Commedia dell'Arte
Characters *in* SCAPIN

Molière used examples of stock characters from *Commedia dell' Arte* in *Scapin*. For example, the lovers (Leander, Octavio), called *innamorati* in Italian comedy, usually have names such as Aurelio, Orazio, Ottavio, Lelio, Leandro, Lindero, etc. They are young and attractive and "are in love with themselves being in love."[2] The last person they usually relate to in the action of the play is often the beloved. Incapable of solving their own problems, they depend upon their servants (*zanni*) to get them out of trouble.

The old men, Géronte and Argan, are at the top of the pecking order in terms of possessing all the money, giving all the orders, dictating to their children and trying to control the social structure. The old men operate on the assumption that everything can be bought or sold, but they will only part with

> **"Each character is the representative of a social class which, by the act of theatre, becomes the magical incarnation of all its class."**
>
> —Carlo Boso[1]

their money when there is absolutely no other option.

In *Commedia dell' Arte*, the *zanni*, Scapin, is a liar and coward who schemed against old men to get money, revenge or both. Though the *zanni* are servants ignorant and loud – they are very savvy with their cunning and knavery. Molière softened the coarseness and ruffian qualities of his *zanni* character, Scapin, and he becomes a model of French style with a bravado that is almost intellectual.

Molière condensed, rearranged and simplified *Commedia dell' Arte* and in his hands "themes took on scope, constructions were tightened—dialogue became articulate and figures gained in stature."[3]

Naples, ITALY

The third largest city in Italy, Naples has often been described as one of the world's most beautiful seaports. Lying on the north shore of the magnificent Bay of Naples, it has been lauded for its gently curving shoreline and sunny beaches, its palm-lined avenues, mild climate and glimpses of the Castel dell'Ovo in the bay. The islands of Capri and Ischia and the volcanic Mt. Vesuvius can be seen in the distance.

The splendor of Naples' physical setting has long attracted tourists. An 1879 visitor to the city remarked, "The Neapolitan, like their volcanic country, are never in a state of repose. Their gaiety has in it something reckless and fierce; as if the burning lava of their craters had a magnetic influence over their temperaments." 1.

Thought to be founded by the Greeks in 7th century BC, the city was first called Parthenope, later

Neapolis. It became part of the Roman Empire and, soon after, palatial villas were built for wealthy Romans. Today it is an important industrial and commercial center, with problems of poverty and pollution. Tourists, artists and lovers of beauty still flock to Naples, attracted to an urban paradise of natural abundance where the people are seemingly carefree.

> **"The mandolinos playing sweet/the pleasant fall of dancing feet Ah, could I return, ah joy complete, Napoli, Napoli, Napoli..."**
> —Victor Herbert. "Neapolitan Street Song."

ACTIVITIES

1. Much of Molière's comedy comes from his use of stock characters such as Scapin, the con artist, the innocent and amorous young lovers, as well as the unabashed servants. Many of these character types can be identified in modern comedy as well. Make a list of stock characters from popular forms of entertainment such as television, movies or cartoons. First, create a name for the type of character, such as "grumpy old man," and then list as many examples as you can. After you have completed your list, share it with the rest of the class. Do any of your character types reflect those you saw in *Scapin*? Why do you think some character types have remained popular since the 17th century? Does your list contain any stock characters that would not have appeared in Molière's plays? If so, why?

2. The theatrical style of *Commedia dell'Arte* from which Molière derived much of his comic devices is famous for its use of masks in costuming the stock characters. In *Scapin*, Silvestro uses an artificial nose. Imagine that you have been appointed designer for *Scapin* and have to design masks for each of the characters. How will the mask reflect the personality of the character? What materials would you use to make the masks? Share your designs with the rest of the class.

3. Acting requires communicating not only with your voice but also with your body. For example, every person has a way of walking that is unique to him/her. Some people walk very erect, some people hunch over, some people take long strides, some people swing their arms widely. Create a character walk for each of the following stock characters.

• The greedy and grumpy old man
• The optimistic and ignorant young lover
• The egotistical aristocrat
• The clumsy and dense servant
• The nagging matriarch
• The sneaky villain

After you have created a walk for each character, perform each for your peers and see if they can guess which walk represents which character.

4. Each person at your school possesses some character traits and individual style. Try to identify a few of the obvious character traits of certain stock personalities in your class. Remember stock characters are cardboard characters of one or two dimensions. You are not looking for the whole person, just a few of the character traits that define them. You probably have a few of these traits yourself. *Commedia dell'Arte* used stereotypes to define characters, the scenarios and the action in order to create humor. Not all servants were sly and smart and not all doctors were pompous bags of wind, but their characters were cardboard, two-dimensional characters with no real depth. Remember, stereotyping others today is considered "politically incorrect" and should be avoided. In *Commedia dell'Arte* style:

Assign character traits to the following:
• The athlete
• The brain
• The boy-crazed girl
• The Romeo (the girl-crazed boy)
• The rebel
• The businessman
• The musician
• The actor/actress
• The teacher
• The teacher's pet
• The class clown
• The janitor

  You get it. Identify a few others. Remember to keep it light; this is just for fun and shows how some people are perceived.

  Now clothe your characters. What do they wear? How do they style their hair?

  Design a mask for your character.

  Create a scenario. Use confusion, complication, mistaken identity or star-crossed lovers.

5. It seems that people have always made fun of other people. It has always been considered vulgar, but since theatre was considered vulgar and base, no one was surprised that this vulgarity existed there. Stereotyping tries to make one believe that all people who look similar have the same traits: the dizzy blonde, dumb athlete, dotty old woman, lecherous old man.

  Why is it wrong to stereotype and make fun of people?

ACTIVITIES
CONTINUED

What have we discovered happens when you stereotype? What happens to the person who believes the stereotype? What happens to the person who is stereotyped?

Why do we make fun of people? The obvious answer is that it is amusing to the people not being typed. What else? Does it have anything to do with fear and low self- esteem? Does it make a person feel better about him or herself and more powerful? Is it ever deserved? When?

6. The playwright ran away with a group of comedians when he was young. Why do some people choose a career or lifestyle that is very difficult to achieve or maintain? Why do they stray from the "normal" path? What drives them? What rewards them? Being an actor is tough these days. There are many that don't earn enough to survive in their craft. In *Commedia's* time, there were centuries when actors were scorned, and yet talented people left their homes to travel with the various companies. Why do you think they did this? What drove them? What motivates people to do the following knowing that only a few will succeed? For example:

• THE ATHLETE —basketball, football, tennis, baseball, golf, etc,
• THE ARTIST—music, art, dance, sculpture, performance arts.
• THE ADVENTURER—balloonist, treasure-seeker, mountain-climber.

Have a discussion about motivation. What motivates one to attempt a difficult lifestyle or task? (Some ideas: talent, adventure, love of what one is doing, desire for acceptance, desire to be noticed, doesn't fit in to a normally accepted lifestyle, has a unique vision or belief, has an ability to concentrate all effort in one direction, other.)

7. Nagle Jackson, the translator and director of *Scapin* decided to set the play in the 19th century, 200 years after Molière wrote it. Research the 1800s. What was happening politically, socially and economically? Why does the play work in a different era? If you were going to set the play in the year 2003, what would you change? What could stay the same? Do you think the play would still make sense set in modern times? Why or why not?

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