Moliere - Man of Satire and Many Burials: Crash Course Theater #21

Crash Course: Theater
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https://nerdfighteria.info/v/mdvfXzCoqvA

Bonjour, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and bienvenue to our second episode set in

France: French Renaissance 2: The Renaissancening. Today, we're taking a closer look at theater architecture in Renaissance France, company organization, and the status of actors. And remember all of those neoclassical rules from the last time? Today we'll meet a guy who broke a bunch of them: the hilarious, possibly incestuous, much-buried comic writer Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, better known as Molière. We'll look at his most controversial play Tartuffe, and also the play that killed him. So grab your baguette, and let's go.

INTRO The first French theaters weren't purpose-built… for theater. Most were former tennis courts. Really, really large tennis courts. But in 1548, the main producer of mystery plays, the Confrerie de la Passion, decided to build a permanent home, the Hotel de Bourgogne. The government outlawed mystery plays that same year, though, so the Confrerie accidentally ended up owning a secular theater. It consisted of a pit or parterre below and a bunch of galleries and boxes above, the highest of them called the paradis, because it was so close to heaven. Get it?

In 1634 the Theatre du Marais was built, on the site of a former tennis court, no less. It burned down, and a nicer version was built in 1644. So the Hotel de Bourgogne had to get nicer, too. At first, these theaters were built assuming medieval style scenery, not all that fancy Italian chariot and pole stuff, but they got there eventually. The government didn't allow a theater troupe to settle permanently in Paris until 1629, so in the early years, the Confrerie rented the theater to some of the hundreds of touring companies who just happened to be passing through. The repertory, then, mostly consisted of medieval farces, classical adaptations, and foreign plays, plus a handful of new French pastorals and tragedies when they got lucky.

In 1629, the king allowed the Troupe Royale to settle in at the Hotel de Bourgogne. And in 1643 another company was allowed to take over the Theatre du Marais. They were joined in 1658 by Molière's company, the Theatre de Monsieur.

So - now that theaters have actors, who went to go see those actors at their theaters? Well, everyone! Though women usually wore masks. Like London, performances took place in the afternoons. Unlike London, the snack bar sold macarons. C'est magnifique! Nobles were sometime seated on the edge of the stage, scandalously close to the working men standing in the pit. Companies usually consisted of eight to twelve actors, plus a couple of apprentices, and every member shared some of the proceeds.

After 1607 women performed as well. The status of actors remained dicey, but in 1641 superfan Louis XIII issued a proclamation saying that actors should be really, really careful not to perform anything immoral or indecent. But as long as they avoided lewdness, "we desire that their occupation, which is capable of providing innocent diversion for our people from certain blameworthy activities, shall not be held to their discredit, nor prejudice their reputation." Isn't it nice when acting isn't criminalized? I think it's nice when acting isn't criminalized.

But, that still doesn't change the church's habit of denying actors baptism, marriage or Christian burial. We've come a long way, I guess. Still plenty far to go, though. As Louis XIII's proclamation suggests, his successor Louis XIV, and their chief ministers loved theater and made France the performing arts vanguard of the late Renaissance. Richelieu was such a fan that he had a theater built into his own house, the Palais Cardinal, and made sure there was plenty of Italianate scenery to fill it. But even before Richelieu's time, the court went big for royal entries, processions, festivals and masques, called ballets de cour.

Remember those really expensive and elaborate masques that sort of bankrupted England and helped bring about the Civil War? Charles picked up the habit in France. Louis XIV loved masques. When Versailles was being built, he sponsored one called "Pleasures of the Enchanted Island." And It lasted three days. Around this time, opera also came into vogue, courtesy of composer Jean-Baptiste Lully.

Other kinds of theater weren't as fancy. French comedy was mostly a mix of medieval farce and ancient sources with jokes borrowed from touring Italian commedia dell'arte players. In the seventeenth century, a popular homegrown troupe emerged consisting of the actor-writers Turlupin, Gros-Guillaume, and Gaultier-Garguille. Obviously these are stage names. No one names their kid "Fat William." Or Turlupin. Gaultier played old men, Gros-Guillaume played fat men, Turlupin played wily servants. They became so popular that they had to play two shows a day in their temporary theater, which upset the more respectable actors at the Hotel de Bourgogne. Those actors appealed to Richelieu. He went and saw the comedians and decided ... they were funny! They should join the Bourgogne's Troupe Royale! And that went pretty well until Gros-Guillaume made fun of a magistrate… and then was thrown into jail… and died. Such is the world Molière arrives in—stock characters, ancient sources, and fat jokes. Molière used them all, but also created something new: contemporary comedies tweaking the morals and manners of the French bourgeoisie—the very people who were his audience.

Molière was born in 1622 and well educated. When he left school his dad gave him a position at court: the keeper of the king's carpets and upholstered furniture. Very Fancy. But Molière gave it all up to become ... an actor. When he was twenty-one, he ran off with the actress Madeline Bejart and they founded the Illustre Theatre. They toured for a couple years before going bankrupt. Molière went to prison for a day. Someone paid the debt, and then the troupe went back to touring. Molière founded a new company, picked up a couple of patrons, and started writing farces that gently mocked French manners. He arrived in Paris in 1658, and impressed the king – who gave his troupe the title Troupe de Monsieur and let them share a palace theater with a commedia company. And how did Molière celebrate? He wrote Les Precieuses Ridicules, a play that made fun of the Academie Francaise.

It probably won't shock you to learn that Molière was not into the neoclassical rules. Molière spent most of his life in hot water. He wrote School for Wives, a comedy about an old man who tries to marry his young ward. When people called it immoral, he wrote The Critique of the School for Wives, a play that mocked those objections and the people who made them. A group called the Devots objected to the naughtiness of the plays and their realism, but the king was a fan, and even gave Molière a pension. And when the original palace theater was torn down, the king hooked Molière up with another palace theater.

Scholars have divided Molière's comedies into comedies of manners, character, and farces. Molière wouldn't have understood his output this way, but some of his plays lean heavily on the stock characters we've come to know and love. Others, while still funny, have greater psychological depth and are more closely attuned to contemporary French society.

Molière's comedy wasn't based on exaggeration or wild coincidence—I'm looking at you, Plautus. He believed that the duty of comedy was to hold a mirror up to life, a mirror that involved some extremely witty dialogue. "You haven't achieved anything in comedy unless your portraits can be seen to be living types," he

said. One of Molière's best-loved and most scandalous plays is the 1664 comedy Tartuffe or L'Imposteur! Hold up that mirror, Thoughtbubble: We meet Orgon, a bourgeois dad who has recently fallen under the sway of Tartuffe, a holy man. Actually, Tartuffe isn't a holy man: he's a con man, and everyone in Orgon's family realizes this but Orgon, and his mother. Orgon believes Tartuffe and decides to give him his daughter, Mariane. Mariane is not psyched. Tartuffe also convinces Orgon to disinherit and banish his son, Damis. Orgon's family tries to get him to see through Tartuffe, but they're unsuccessful. Elmire, Orgon's clever wife, convinces Orgon to hide under the table while Tartuffe tries to seduce her. Finally Orgon realizes Tartuffe is a fraud, but Tartuffe gets hold of some incriminating letters and has Orgon kicked out of his own house and accused of treason. It seems like it's all going to end badly, but somehow Louis XIV hears about Tartuffe's duplicity and arranges to have him arrested. Rex ex machina! Orgon gets his stuff back, the family is reunited, and his daughter gets to marry someone she likes.

Guess how much the Catholic church liked Tartuffe? Not at all!. A lot of religious leaders thought Molière's attacks were about them specifically. The Archbishop of Paris wrote a letter saying he would excommunicate anyone who saw or even read the play. Pressured by the church and by family, the king supported a ban. Molière had to revise the play, rewriting it so that it made less fun of the church and he also changed the main character's name, but that version was banned, too. He wrote a third version in 1669, and that's the one we have today. Thanks, Thoughtbubble!

In 1667, an anonymous letter was published, Lettre sur la comédie de l'Imposteur, defending the comedy. It was probably written by Molière, but we don't know for sure. The letter said that it's right to laugh at the ridiculous and that the audience would become more moral through that laughter. The author hoped people would see the hypocrisy, pretension and greed that Moliere skewered, and work to rid themselves of those same qualities. Basically: LOOK IN THIS HERE MIRROR, SOCIETY.

In 1673, Molière premiered his last play, The Imaginary Invalid, about a hypochondriac who tries to marry his daughter off to a doctor. Molière played Argan, the hypochondriac. But Molière really was ill. He'd had tuberculosis for many years and began coughing up blood during a performance. He was carried home and died that night, before he could renounce acting and be given last rites. That's right: the church denied him a Christian burial. But Louis XIV intervened and had him buried in a churchyard. Now here's the part Yorick likes: A century later, after the Revolution, Molière was dug up and moved to the museum of French monuments. Twenty-five years after that, he was buried again in Pere Lachaise, where you can visit his grave today. Rest in peace, Jean-Baptiste.

After Molière's death, there's a bunch of hassle with theaters and troupes, but several members of his troupe were absorbed into the newly formed Comedie Francaise, which is still going today and still performs his plays as part of the repertory. Next time we're heading off to the """New""" World. Oh, and guess who gets scripted theater going there? That's right. It's another nun. Until next time… curtain!