

Moliere's "The Imaginary Invalid" is a farcical play about a hypochondriac who is so obsessed with his health and money that he ends up neglecting his family. The story involves several different themes and plots within one family. A new interpretation of this 17th century play is now being performed at the Arts Club Theater; it incorporates some new changes and modernizations in addition to the traditional improvisation. Morris Panych has definitely succeeded in delivering a new, more comical version of Moliere's final play.

Moreover, the dominant theme of this play is body versus mind. The play is about a wealthy, but stingy man who believes that he is constantly sick (Argan). However, there is an obvious doubt to whether he is really sick or if he is just imagining his illness. Therefore, the primary theme is Argan's internal struggle of body vs. mind. This theme is developed throughout the play into smaller themes such as masculinity versus femininity, greed versus love, and death versus life.

Two of the major changes from the text to the play are Argan's degree of illness and his death. In the text, there are very few elaborate descriptions of Dr. Purgon's treatment. However in the play by Panych, there is no shortage of enemas and other "bathroom" related scenes. I originally thought this change was for comical purposes, but after some additional thought I questioned whether Argan was imagining his illness or if he really was ill. In the text, by not having too many bathroom scenes, Argan seems to be imagining his illness (thus, he is the imaginary invalid). In Panych's stage version, Argan shows several symptoms of being ill; this definitely confuses the original play by Moliere. One of the original purposes of the play was to criticize, among other things, the medical profession in Moliere's time. Now, if Argan really was sick, does that mean that the doctors were correct in their analysis? No, it doesn't. I believe that Panych intended to show that it was the doctors' treatments that made Argan ill and eventually killed him.

Another major change from Moliere's version is Beralde's gender and role in the play and in the family. Beralde is transformed into Argan's sister, instead of his brother. Panych saw male versus female as a major theme. If you look at the structure of the original play, all the people who truly love Argan and mean him well are female, except for Beralde. In fact out of all the different characters who take advantage of Argan, only one of them is female- Beline (yet, even she has more traditional male characteristics than some of the male characters in the play). Therefore it makes more sense for Beralde to be a female in the play. Panych also changed Beralde's role in the play. In the original version Beralde is the "man of passionate eloquence, resourceful valet, good father, master of revels, he is a foil for all the evils [in the play]: delusion, credulity, tyranny, and fear" (p110). However, in Panych's version, Toinette is the character who is responsible for putting an end to all the evils. She is the one who is responsible for exposing Beline as evil and she is the one who helps convince Argan that not all doctors are trustworthy by disguising herself as one of them. Therefore, Beralde's role in the play is almost strictly comedic- she acts as a narrator. She is the first character the audience sees and hears; and, instead of being the stable brother, she comes out claiming that she is the crazy sister.

Finally, the last major change is the exclusion of Punchinello (Toinette's Lover) from the stage version. One of the major themes in this play is love. Everyone in the play, has someone to love; however, in Panych's production the Toinette's lover is excluded. There are two possible reasons for this. First, Panych might have decided that there were already too many plots and not enough time. Second, the maid is the heroine in the play- in the end she cures Argan of his selfishness, exposes Beline's greed, and makes it possible for Angelique to marry the man she loves- and therefore instead of having a love, her purpose in life is to maintain order in Argan's life. I believe that the second reason is the more probable one, out of the two. Also, from seeing the stage version, it could be quite possible that Panych wanted Toinette to be in love with Argan. This theory may be justified by just looking at the scenes involving Toinette and Argan. In

every scene in which they are together, they quarrel as if they are husband and wife or brother and sister.

There are endless interpretations of what Panych really wanted to portray; was it about a man who imagined his illness in his mind and then used it to get attention from those around him, or was it about a man who was really ill and needed people to care for him? Panych doesn't make this clear in his version; therefore I walked out of the play feeling dumbfounded. This feeling did not overcome me after I finished the text version. It was obvious to me that in the text, Argan was only imagining his illness and that he was in dire need of attention. Argan has two groups of people surrounding him; one group (the doctors, Beline, the Notary) wanted his money and the other group (Angelique, Toinette, Beralde, Luisson) only wanted his love.

The stage was quite magnificent at first and it definitely contributed to the mood of the play. It had six doors on the right side and four doors on the left side; also, the right side was pink, while the left side was light blue. In addition to the many doors and different colours of the set, there were several different angles contributing to what was basically an optical illusion. The angle of the floor and walls made everything which was downstage appear as though it was bigger than the objects upstage. Argan and his "throne" (which was actually a big toilet) were placed in the middle of the stage; therefore allowing all the action to revolve around him. The set was meant to symbolize the themes of the play. Pink is a colour usually associated with life, love, health, and femininity. Blue is associated with sickness, death, unhappiness, and (oddly enough) masculinity. I believe that this was a good idea in theory.

The acting was superb, creative, and hilarious. I found that Panych selected a cast of actors who all work very well together and who are all very talented improvisers and comedians. I remember being very impressed by Ellie Harvie's (Angelique) improvisation skills when she went out to speak to her "imaginary friends" (the audience). She required some responses from a couple of audience members, who weren't being too helpful, to explain how and where she met Cleante. The responses put her in Stanley Park, where she saw Cleante and immediately being attracted to Cleante's fleshy left ear. This was probably one of the most successful scenes in the play as judged by audience response. As the play progressed some of the other actors, such as Ted Cole (Cleante), incorporated the audience members' responses into his dialogue. He referred to his meeting with Angelique at Stanley Park in the scene where he and Angelique are improvising an opera in the second act. All the actors worked very well with each other and produced many comical moments with the use of pure body language, facial expressions, and their gorgeous costumes. Toinette's mustache that kept falling off her face when she was dressed up as a doctor is a good example of a comedic improvisation, especially when she stepped on it and yelled, "Cockroach!". Another instance of good interaction between the actors came between Toinette and Angelique; when Angelique is describing her love for Cleante in the early part of the first act to Toinette. Instead of letting her tone of voice be the only indicator of that she is tired of listening to Angelique's rambling, Leslie Jones (Toinette) walks around the stage looking for any chore to keep her occupied while having to listen to Angelique. This provides the audience with several laughs and a better understanding of both of the characters on stage. The actors' voices and actions were always clear; this was one of the factors that kept the audience involved and attentive at all times- not even once, did I not comprehend a word or action. The acting was definitely the most valuable asset of this play because of the interaction that occurred between the actors on stage.

In addition to the brilliant stage and acting, the costumes and lighting further complimented this play. The costumes definitely had a 17th century look, but with a 20th century twist. Toinette's dress was probably the best used throughout the play. At one point in the play, she hides several bags by standing over them and covering them with her dress. Beline's costume was also quite amusing and it definitely also added to her evil character. Her dress was very different from the other actresses, which reinforced the fact that she was the only evil

female character in the play.

The lighting was also another contributor to the successful production. The lights didn't change very often. When they did change it was for a purpose related to the play- whenever there was a soliloquy, all the other characters would freeze, and a spotlight would focus in on the character who was speaking. Also, in the beginning of the play there was a "shadow" act played out from behind the curtain. For it to work, there was a light behind the actors (who were behind the curtain) and their actions were reflected onto the curtain by the light.

Besides the scenes involving fake turds and the scene where Argan shows us his buttocks, I thoroughly enjoyed my first experience in the theater. At times it appeared to be a stand-up comedy act, as late-comers were ridiculed by the actors and interaction with the audience occurred throughout the play. The play was well directed, acted, and produced and the audience response was tremendous- I was quite surprised that there wasn't a standing ovation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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