Celebrating 25 CLASSICAL Years
2011|2012 ANNIVERSARY SEASON

September 6–October 23, 2011
January 17–March 4, 2012
March 27–April 29, 2012
May 15–July 1, 2012
June 12–July 15, 2012

For tickets! 202.547.1122
ShakespeareTheatre.org

Cover photo by Scott Suchman. Carlo Goldoni, Jean-François Regnard, William Shakespeare and Eugene O’Neill also pictured.
Above photo of Floyd King and season photography by Scott Suchman.
STC’s 2011–2012 Season

We are embarking on an unparalleled journey. The Shakespeare Theatre Company is celebrating 25 glorious seasons of classical theatre under the helm of visionary, Michael Kahn. The production offerings of our 25th Anniversary Season are remarkable plays that ring with truth, and promise to delight, enlighten and entertain audiences throughout the year.

This 2011-2012 Anniversary Guide to the Season’s Plays is an artistic tool to complement your own personal exploration of classic plays. These essays burrow deep into the mind of the playwright and ask probing questions or hypothesize on the possible factors that influenced the creation of each individual work. In conjunction with our impactful productions, the Guide provides another layer of discovery, examining larger issues and acknowledging the talented artists of the Shakespeare Theatre Company and the performances on our stages.

This season, we are blessed by a variety of styles within the classic comedic realm. A world premiere of Jean-François Regnard’s The Heir Apparent, adapted by David Ives and directed by Michael Kahn, depicts a miserly world where scheming relatives and rhyming couplets abound. The always charming Much Ado About Nothing, directed by Ethan McSweeny, shines a light on courtship as the quarrelsome Beatrice and Benedick endeavor to resist Cupid’s arrows. Shakespeare’s classic tale of friendship and adventure, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, directed by PJ Paparelli, examines the foibles of secret desires and tarnished ideals. The 25th Anniversary Season takes a dramatic turn with Michael Kahn’s gripping adaptation of Eugene O’Neill’s Pulitzer Prize-winning innovative drama Strange Interlude, as it explores what lies beneath our spoken words. Carlo Goldoni’s magical comedy, The Servant of Two Masters, is staged with unique physical theatricality by commedia dell’arte master Christopher Bayes. And to complete our epic journey, director Stephen Rayne will close the season with the bawdy and beloved The Merry Wives of Windsor.

All of the plays of the season are popular in performance, though not always so in criticism. The quality of comedy in these plays is culled not solely from the language, though the text is witty and poignant, but in the vibrant characters and remarkable situations. It is more fun to witness a scruffy dog onstage interrupting his impatient master’s speech in The Two Gentlemen of Verona than to read the described act on the page. The entrances and exits of characters in both The Heir Apparent and The Servant of Two Masters are somewhat inconsequential when read yet uproariously comedic when executed on the stage. The barbed banter between Beatrice and Benedick, amusing on the page, takes on a thrilling vibrancy when it becomes a power struggle between two skilled actors. Strange Interlude’s melodrama becomes an engrossing pageant of classic proportions when unraveled before our eyes.

This Guide to the Season’s Plays is just one of many opportunities to engage with the work on STC’s stages. Join us at our Creative Conversations to hear experts speak and to share your ideas. Pick up a copy of Asides magazine to travel backstage and deepen your experience.

And so, the journey begins. We hope to see you at the theatres.

Samantha K. Wyer
Director of Education
CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS
FOR THE 2011–2012 SEASON

Join the FREE exchange of ideas! STC's Creative Conversations give our audiences the chance to connect deeply with the work on stage. Whether you are interested in historical background, theological perspective, creative points of view or voicing your own experiences, we have a discussion for you.

WINDOWS
The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall, 5–6 p.m.
Join STC’s Artistic staff and guest scholars as they provide a “window” into the productions this season. Each hour-long pre-show conversation articulates the theatrical process through an insightful, lively series of discussions.

- **The Heir Apparent**
  - Sunday, September 11, 2011
- **Much Ado About Nothing**
  - Sunday, November 27, 2011
- **The Two Gentlemen of Verona**
  - Sunday, January 22, 2012
- **Strange Interlude**
  - Sunday, April 1, 2012
- **The Servant of Two Masters**
  - Sunday, May 20, 2012
- **The Merry Wives of Windsor**
  - Sunday, June 17, 2012

POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSIONS
Sidney Harman Hall, Lansburgh Theatre
Extend the experience by staying immediately following the evening’s production for a post-performance discussion led by STC’s Literary Associate Drew Lichtenberg.

- **The Heir Apparent**
  - Wednesday, September 14, 2011
- **Much Ado About Nothing**
  - Wednesday, December 7, 2011
- **The Two Gentlemen of Verona**
  - Wednesday, January 25, 2012
- **Strange Interlude**
  - Wednesday, April 4, 2012
- **The Servant of Two Masters**
  - Wednesday, May 23, 2012
- **The Merry Wives of Windsor**
  - Wednesday, June 20, 2012

DIVINING SHAKESPEARE
The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall, 5–6 p.m.
Explore the play’s relevance from a theological perspective. Director of the Institute for Christian Formation at the Virginia Theological Seminary Reverend Roger Ferlo will be joined in conversation by STC’s Audience Enrichment Manager Hannah J. Hessel.

- **The Heir Apparent**
  - Saturday, October 1, 2011
- **Much Ado About Nothing**
  - Saturday, December 17, 2011
- **The Two Gentlemen of Verona**
  - Saturday, February 11, 2012
- **Strange Interlude**
  - Saturday, April 21, 2012
- **The Servant of Two Masters**
  - Saturday, June 9, 2012
- **The Merry Wives of Windsor**
  - Saturday, July 7, 2012

CLASSICS IN CONTEXT
The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall, 5–6 p.m.
Put the show in context with this lively roundtable conversation. The Classics in Context panel gives the audience the opportunity to discuss the production with a team of experts, led by Director of Education Samantha K. Wyer.

- **The Heir Apparent**
  - Saturday, October 1, 2011
- **Much Ado About Nothing**
  - Saturday, December 17, 2011
- **The Two Gentlemen of Verona**
  - Saturday, February 11, 2012
- **Strange Interlude**
  - Saturday, April 21, 2012
- **The Servant of Two Masters**
  - Saturday, June 9, 2012
- **The Merry Wives of Windsor**
  - Saturday, July 7, 2012

All conversations are FREE and open to the public!

Pick up a copy of *Asides* in our theatre’s lobbies for more information on the season’s plays and productions. Visit Asides Online at [Asides.ShakespeareTheatre.org](http://Asides.ShakespeareTheatre.org).
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Jean François-Regnard’s
THE HEIR APPARENT

**Synopsis**

Crispin and Lisette, servants in love, discuss the condition of their masters. Lisette works in the household of Geronte, a wealthy miser, while Crispin works for Geronte’s nephew, Eraste, who has been waiting for the old man to die. Eraste has been wooing the lovely Isabelle, but her mother Madame Argante refuses to approve their engagement unless he is named Geronte’s heir apparent. Eraste joins them to hear that Madame Argante is next door, arranging a wedding and a will with Geronte.

Geronte, complaining of his illness, reveals his new plan, hatched with Madame Argante: he himself will marry Isabelle that afternoon. Isabelle faints amidst the uproar, leaving Eraste, Crispin and Lisette in a state of disbelief. Geronte has more bad news: he plans to leave sizable inheritances to two newly found relatives. As Geronte demands to finish his will (and write Eraste out of it), Crispin appears, dressed as Geronte’s newfound American nephew. After a series of increasingly violent and outrageous threats, Eraste plays the role of hero and dispatches this newfound American cousin. But Crispin reappears as Geronte’s other new relative, Niece Julie, a pork heiress. Unexpectedly, Isabelle has also dressed up as Niece Julie. The two Niece Julies begin quarreling, having forgotten Geronte. Just when they appear to have stopped, Eraste appears, also dressed as Niece Julie. The scene climaxes with Geronte, stricken and returning to his bedchamber. Lisette checks on him and returns to report Geronte’s apparent death. The two lovers and two servants set off eagerly in search of his money.

Crispin, Eraste and Lisette, still searching for Geronte’s money, are interrupted by Scruple, Geronte’s lawyer. Crispin, again improvising, decides to impersonate Geronte and dictate the will himself. Crispin and Scruple have almost finished when Geronte, very much alive, reappears and tries to get into his bedroom. Eraste and Lisette attempt to block Geronte’s way, as Scruple continues to take dictation from Crispin in disguise. Geronte sits in his chair, and Crispin immediately begins to work his hands like a puppet. Scruple, who has been buried in his papers, looks up and begins arguing with Geronte.

Just when Crispin seems to have the situation back under control, Madame Argante barges in, dragging Isabelle, and accuses Eraste of having some plan afoot. Scruple finally sees the two Gerontes and utters a startled shout, causing Argante to turn and begin berating the diminutive lawyer. Eraste takes this opportunity to grab the will and announce its final details. Argante, seeing that Geronte has left her money, is touched and forces him (i.e. Crispin) to sign the will, acting as his legal witness.

Yet again, it appears that Crispin and Eraste have secured their fortunes. But suddenly, Lisette rushes in with the surprising news that Geronte is alive and well, and dressing for his wedding day. The events of the past day have transformed him completely into the picture of good health and spirits. The whole company gathers onstage to see Geronte agree (with some last complaints) to the terms of his will, allowing three couples to get married amidst a huge pile of money.
Regnard and the French Comedy after Molière
by Marvin Carlson

The golden age of French playwriting, corresponding in influence and achievement to the Elizabethan era in England, was the mid-17th century. This era produced the great triumvirate of the French classic stage: the tragic dramatists Corneille and Racine and the master of comedy, Molière. So great was their success and their reputation in their own era that their work served as models for dramatic authors for generations. So great was the renown of these three masters, however, that their glory has tended to eclipse the contributions of others, as Shakespeare has eclipsed many talented contemporaries and successors.

This has been particularly true of Jean-François Regnard, who was the first major comic dramatist to appear in France after the death of Molière in 1673. At the time of Molière’s passing, Regnard was still a youth of 18, who showed little promise of a distinguished career in playwriting. Like the hero of his most famous play, he was the sole heir when his father, a prosperous merchant, died two years later. The fortune allowed him to travel widely across Europe and experience a wide range of romantic adventures, including a capture in 1678 by Algerian pirates, who took him as a slave to Constantinople, where he was ransomed by the French consul. This experience did not lessen his love for travel, and he gained his first literary fame through a book about his wanderings across Northern and Central Europe, published in 1681.

Back in Paris, he turned his hand to playwriting, and from 1688 to 1696 became one of the most popular authors at the Comédie Italienne. Although Italian improvised comedy, the commedia dell’arte, had been seen at the French court since late in the previous century, a troupe of Italian actors established a permanent theatre in Paris in 1653. Their language was no major barrier since their productions relied heavily on farcical action, song and spectacle. Still more and more French naturally began to creep into their performances, and in 1684 they were given permission by the king (the official sponsor of the theatre) to perform works entirely in French, like their rival, the Comédie Française, the company which had been led by Molière.

At first this did not seriously affect the sort of plays presented at the Italienne, which remained primarily loosely organized entertainments in the commedia tradition, with traditional stock characters—the young lovers, the miserly father, the wily servant—traditional farcical actions and verbal interchanges, song and spectacle. Soon, however, dramatists with a more literary concern were attracted to the theatre. The most important of these was Regnard, who made his theatrical debut there with a one-act comedy, Le Divorce, in 1688. Although all of Regnard’s comedies have close connections to the commedia dell’arte tradition, spectators who are familiar with the work of Molière are more likely to see a strong influence of that author. Actually, there is no contradiction here, since Molière himself was clearly strongly influenced by the work of the Comédie Italienne, with whom his company shared the same theatre during some of his most productive years. The misunderstandings, the extensive use of disguises, especially by the witty servants, the romantic rivalry between fathers and sons, the elaborate plots and intrigues, the parallel love pairings between the hero and heroine and between their servants and the grotesquely exaggerated members of the older generation all came to both Regnard and Molière from the
Nevertheless, Regnard certainly shows direct influence from his French predecessor as well, and one can hardly mistake the echoes of plays like *The Miser* in Regnard’s best-known work, *Le Légataire Universel* (*The Heir Apparent*).

For almost a decade Regnard regularly provided plays for the Comédie Italienne, light-hearted studies of contemporary society primarily based on love intrigues and the antics and plots of ingenious servants. Other writers at this theatre, however, created works that began to trouble the court, works that were more licentious and, worse yet, irreverent about influential figures, like the King’s mistress, Madame de Maintenon. A satire widely thought to be directed at her caused the theatre to be closed in 1697. This was not a serious blow to Regnard since he had already begun to have his work represented at the more prestigious national theatre, the Comédie Française. From 1697 onward Regnard became the leading contemporary comic dramatist at this theatre, which produced 11 of his plays. Although most other comic dramatists of the period now wrote in prose, Regnard returned to Molière’s favored practice of writing in rhymed couplets, and his success gave significant new life to this comic style.

The three plays for which Regnard is primarily remembered (he wrote 25 in all) were all premiered at the Comédie Française: *Le Joueur* (*The Gambler*) in 1696, *Les Folies Amoureuses* (*The Amorous Follies*) in 1704 and what is generally considered his masterpiece, *Le Légataire Universel* (*The Heir Apparent*) in 1708. All of these contained sharply drawn comic characters, witty exchanges and engaging plots with much use of disguise and intrigue. But probably the feature that gave *The Heir Apparent* its extra appeal was that in it Regnard went beyond such individual foibles as gambling or absent-mindedness to consider one of the great comic themes in Western drama from the Renaissance onward, the struggle over inheritance. It was also his final full-length work, as he died the following year.

For the next century and a half, Regnard remained a frequently produced author, not only in France, but also in much of Europe. By the middle of the 19th century, however, his reputation was fading. The new interest in realism then on the rise in the French theatre and elsewhere found the classic tradition of writing both tragedies and many comedies in verse much too stiff and artificial for changing tastes. Equally important, although Molière’s popularity continued and if anything increased with the passing of time, that very prominence caused Regnard to be more and more regarded, not entirely fairly, as a pale imitator of the master. His imitations were seen as following the “lesser” Molière, the *commedia*-influenced farces like *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* or *La Malade Imaginaire*, and not the darker psychological comedies, more suited to 19th century taste, like *Tartuffe* or *Le Misanthrope*. He developed his own comic style, more attuned to the subtleties and nuances of everyday life and yet full of complicated plotting that made less use of devices like lengthy repetition than did the farces of his predecessor. In such ways he looked forward to Beaumarchais as well as backward to Molière.

In the latter 20th century, Regnard’s reputation has to some extent been restored by literary scholars like Dorothy Medlin and by a number of engaging new translations like that of David Ives of *The Heir Apparent*, which manage to achieve the extremely difficult task of recapturing the sparkling and ingenious comic rhymes and rhythms that are at the very heart of Regnard’s effervescent and still highly entertaining evocation of early 18th century French society. Romantic and financial manipulations have been at the heart of comedy from the Greeks to today, and Regnard offers his own unique and witty exploration of these familiar themes in comedies that deserve the opportunity of delighting new audiences today and in the future.
SUGGESTED READING


CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

**WINDOWS:** Sunday, September 11, 2011, at 5 p.m.

**DIVINING SHAKESPEARE:** Wednesday, September 14, 2011, at 5 p.m.

**POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION:** Wednesday, September 14, 2011

**CLASSICS IN CONTEXT:** Saturday, October 1, 2011, at 5 p.m.

Leonato, Governor of Messina, is host to Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, who has returned from a victorious campaign against his rebellious brother, Don John. Leonato shares his house with his lovely young daughter, Hero; his playful, witty niece, Beatrice; and his elderly brother, Antonio. Returning with Don Pedro from war are Don John, now “reconciled” to him; Claudio, a well-respected young Florentine nobleman of whom Don John is bitterly resentful; and Benedick, a Paduan lord said to be a confirmed bachelor and engaged in a “merry war” with Beatrice, a confirmed spinster.

When the soldiers arrive at Leonato’s home, Claudio quickly falls in love with Hero. Meanwhile, Beatrice and Benedick resume the war of witty insults that they have carried on with each other in the past. At a masked ball, Don Pedro, Claudio and Hero plan to trick Beatrice and Benedick into falling in love. After the ball, the wedding of Claudio and Hero is planned.

Don Pedro, Claudio and Leonato ensure that Benedick (hidden in a garden arbor) hears them discuss Beatrice’s presumably passionate love for him. Hero and Ursula, her gentlewoman, play a similar trick on the listening Beatrice. Meanwhile, Don John plots against Hero and Claudio. He has his companion, Borachio, make love to Margaret, Hero’s gentlewoman, at Hero’s window on the eve of the wedding and brings Don Pedro and Claudio to watch. The plot works, but Constable Dogberry’s men hear a drunken Borachio boasting of his part in the plan and arrest him.

Believing he has seen her being unfaithful to him, the enraged Claudio humiliates Hero and denounces her at the altar, at which she faints and is left for dead. Friar Francis, disbelieving the charge, proposes that Hero should hide until the truth is revealed and enlists the aid of Leonato, who announces that his daughter has died of grief. In the aftermath of the abandoned ceremony, Benedick and Beatrice finally confess their love to one another. Beatrice demands that Benedick prove his love by killing Claudio. Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel, but Dogberry brings in Borachio who reveals Don John’s plot. With Borachio’s confession, Hero is exonerated. Leonato demands a public apology from Claudio, and in penance for causing Hero’s alleged death, Claudio agrees to marry Leonato’s hitherto unseen niece—and only when he unveils his bride does he find out that she is Hero. Beatrice and Benedick resolve their “merry war” and agree to wed alongside them as news comes that Don John has been taken prisoner.
The Complexities of
Much Ado About Nothing
by Maurice Hunt

In Much Ado About Nothing, Shakespeare created an especially enduring—that is to say, durable—complex character: Beatrice. Her permanence paradoxically rests on shifting sands: those of a radical inconstancy of human nature and the unreliability of speech, sight and hearing for certainty.

King Charles I crossed out the title of Much Ado About Nothing in his Shakespeare folio edition and instead wrote “Beatrice and Benedick.” Readers and playgoers knew the play throughout the Restoration and even afterwards by this title because this marvelously witty comedy memorably captured for audiences the eternal battle between men and women in love. While Benedick has many sharp rejoinders, Beatrice generally gets the better of him in their verbal skirmishes. “What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?” Benedick replies, “Is it possible Disdain should die, while she hath such food to feed it as Signor Benedick?” (act 1, scene 1). “You have put him down, lady, you have put him down,” Don Pedro later says. “So I would not he should do me, my lord, lest I should prove
the mother of fools” (act 2, scene 1), she salaciously quibbles. Hers are the utterances that often disappear last in auditors’ memories after those of other characters in the play have been forgotten.

The complexity of Beatrice’s character has fascinated audiences. She is an orphan, the parentless niece of Leonato and Antonio. Instinctively, she knows that Hero is innocent of the charge of fornication when all the men are convinced of her guilt. Heavy patriarchal figures, her uncles remind Beatrice that her aggressive, cutting verbal wit will likely drive away prospective husbands. They patronize her, and along with other men such as Don Pedro, cast her in the role of their amusing entertainer. Evidently she is not as pretty as her demure, silent cousin Hero. The anger informing her wit comes not just from the resentment forged by having to navigate around patriarchal laws and demeaning remarks but also from having been burned once before by the withdrawal of Benedick’s affections. She says twice after Claudio has humiliated Hero at the altar that she wishes God had made her a man. If Benedick wants her love, he must “Kill Claudio” (act 4, scene 1). Still, Don Pedro believes that Beatrice was “born in a merry hour.” “No, sure, my lord, my mother cried,” she asserts, “but then there was a star danced, and under that was I born” (act 2, scene 1). A vague allusion in Beatrice’s striking imagery to the Nativity star makes her birth special—just as she is showing playgoers she is. And yet being special cannot hide her lonely pain. “She is never sad but when she sleeps,” Leonato says, “and not ever sad then; for I have heard my daughter say she hath often dreamt of unhappiness and waked herself with laughing” (act 2, scene 1).

When in 1598 he wrote Much Ado About Nothing, Shakespeare had not created as complex a female character as Beatrice proves to be. Juliet comes close, but she cannot make playgoers circle her flame to the extent they do Beatrice’s. In fact, in all of preceding English literature, only Chaucer’s Wife of Bath vies with Beatrice for the distinction I have granted her. Sir Philip Sidney’s Pamela in his pastoral romance, Arcadia, cannot match Beatrice. No woman on the stage in the preceding plays of Robert Greene, John Lyly or Christopher Marlowe possesses Beatrice’s combination of complexity and life-likeness. This remarkable blend succeeds despite Shakespeare’s portrayal in Much Ado of the indistinct, often unreliable bases for human understanding and love.

Shakespeare in mid-career especially stressed the radical inconstancy and frailty of human nature. Hamlet may say, “Frailty thy name is woman,” but the Player-King at the midpoint of the great tragedy written a year or two after Much Ado essentially says, “Frailty thy name is humankind.” Balthazar, in the comedy’s famous song “Sigh no more, ladies,” claims that men are “to one thing constant never” (act 2, scene 3). “For man is a giddy thing,” Benedick says at play’s end, “and this is my conclusion” (act 5, scene 4). This low-key assessment seems to have been Shakespeare’s. Beatrice and Benedick distrust each other’s professions of love because words can mask or misrepresent all kinds of intentions. Thus when Don Pedro and Hero execute for their own amusement their scheme to have Benedick and Beatrice overhear talk of how much each is secretly loved by the other, they succeed because their words, which Beatrice and Benedick have never spoken, seem so plausible. When Don Pedro strangely appropriates Claudio’s wooing of Hero, courting her in disguise, characters hear only part of what he says he will do, or they misinterpret his speech. Antonio tells Leonato that a “good sharp fellow” has overheard Don Pedro speak of wooing Hero, but he didn’t hear him say he does so to win Hero for Claudio. Thus both Antonio and Leonato think that Don Pedro will tell Leonato he wants to wed Hero. Don John’s man Borachio, however, hiding behind a curtain, has overheard Don Pedro’s whole plot and so provides Don John with the opportunity to make Claudio think Don Pedro woos for himself. This plot comes to nothing, but the villain’s plot to get Claudio and the other men to believe Hero is unfaithful by seeing Borachio exit her chamber window triumphs because sight
is so weak that they cannot distinguish Margaret wearing Hero’s dress at the window. And so callow Claudio rejects Hero. Commentators on Much Ado About Nothing usually point out that the words “nothing” and “noting” were pronounced alike in Shakespeare’s time, and that the title can refer to the great stir in Messina caused by faulty “noting”—inaccurate because of frail hearing and seeing.

Compensating for and overcoming this epistemological instability poses the greatest challenge to the realization of Benedick and Beatrice’s and Claudio and Hero’s marriages. These marriages eventually occur for two reasons. The first involves Dogberry’s and his watch’s providential overhearing of Borachio tell Conrade the truth about Don John’s deception of Claudio. Providential is the right word here. Dogberry and the watch sit upon “the church bench” (act 3, scene 3), a hallowed place from which they note Borachio’s treachery. “I have a good eye, uncle,” Beatrice tells Leonato; “I can see a church by daylight” (act 1, scene 2). Her remark associates clarity of vision, an exception in this play, with the religious, with the spiritual. Dogberry, while punchy in his malapropisms, is the play’s most pious character, mentioning “God” no fewer than 13 times. But the admittedly vague suggestion of a providence operating in Messina also depends upon a human capacity, the ability to freeze the unstable spoken word, here and then gone, into writing. Two of Dogberry’s crew, Hugh Oakcake and George Seacoal, can read and write. Dogberry directs Seacoal, a sexton, to transcribe Borachio’s testimony after he is arrested. “Write God first,” Dogberry orders, “for God defend but God should go before such villains” (act 4, scene 2). The recorded word makes Don John’s guilt incontestable.

The second reason the marriages occur involves the power of the written word over that of the spoken word. Leonato tells Claudio to write and hang an epitaph upon Hero’s supposed tomb. Read at her tomb, the epitaph’s verse expresses the truth that she was wronged by slanderous tongues as well as Claudio’s belief that she “lives in death with glorious fame” (act 5, scene 3). The epitaph thus becomes part of Claudio’s imaginative reconstruction of Hero, which Friar Francis has proposed and engineered, such that he is better disposed to love Hero when he learns that she is not dead but alive.

Having learned that their commitment to love each other was a result of Don Pedro’s stratagem involving scripted dialogue that they were manipulated into overhearing, Beatrice and Benedick threaten to revert to their old skepticism about affection. But the discovery of their sonnets that reveal their honest love for the other cannot be denied. “A miracle!” Benedick exclaims, “Here’s our own hands against our hearts!” (act 5, scene 4). In the spirit of Shakespeare’s own sonnets, art makes possible relative permanence because, as a record of the emotions of a fleeting moment, it can be experienced repeatedly and the existence of the feelings verified. Much ado can be legitimately made of this kind of noting.
SUGGESTED READING


CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

WINDOWS: Sunday, November 27, 2011, at 5 p.m.

DIVINING SHAKESPEARE: Wednesday, December 7, 2011, at 5 p.m.

POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION: Wednesday, December 7, 2011

ASIDESLIVE SYMPOSIUM: Sunday, December 11, 10 a.m.–1 p.m.

CLASSICS IN CONTEXT: Saturday, December 17, 2011, at 5 p.m.
Valentine and Proteus, two gentlemen of Verona, are close friends. Valentine, seeking to be “tutor’d in the world,” goes with his servant Speed to Milan. Proteus, who is in love with Julia (as she is with him), is also ordered by his father to leave for Milan with his servant Launce and Launce’s dog, Crab. As soon as Proteus and Julia part, she disguises herself as a boy and hurries after him. In Milan, Valentine falls in love with the Duke’s daughter, Silvia. When Proteus arrives they tell him that because the Duke prefers the wealthier Turio, they plan to elope.

Proteus himself becomes infatuated with Silvia and, in an ungentlemanly fashion, informs the Duke of the elopement. The Duke finds a rope ladder under Valentine’s cloak and banishes him from Milan where Valentine then becomes the leader of a highly selective band of outlaws. Julia, still disguised as a boy, hears Turio’s musicians serenading Silvia. Proteus, too, is listening and after Turio has gone, he proclaims his love, which Silvia scorns. Julia, recognizing his voice as he attempts to woo Silvia, remains steadfast in her love for him. Proteus takes the disguised Julia ("Sebastian") as his page and sends her as his messenger to Silvia, who continues to reject him for the absent Valentine, whom she decides to follow into banishment.

The Duke pursues his escaping daughter and is captured by the outlaws. While Silvia is rescued by Proteus, who attempts to force his love upon her, the watching Valentine attacks his friend for his treachery, then becomes very magnanimous by giving Silvia to him. Julia/Sebastian, swooning, reveals herself; the outlaws bring in the Duke who pardons them. Julia and Proteus are reunited as are Valentine and Silvia. Both couples are set to wed.
The Two Gentlemen of Verona: Shakespeare’s Apprentice Work
by Elizabeth Rivlin

The Two Gentlemen of Verona has the odd distinction of being at once a popular, often performed play in the contemporary theatre and a critical ugly duckling, chastised by one of its early editors, the poet Alexander Pope, for containing scenes “composed of the lowest and most trifling conceits.” Another 18th-century writer, John Upton, went further in wishing that Two Gentlemen, along with Love’s Labor’s Lost, “should be sent packing, and seek for their parent elsewhere.”

Upton and Pope have been far from alone in finding serious flaws in this play, believed to be one of the earliest that Shakespeare wrote. We lack a precise date of composition, but scholars hypothesize that Shakespeare wrote Two Gentlemen between 1591 and 1594. The play has become known as an apprentice work, an artifact of a moment when Shakespeare was still learning the craft of playwriting and was therefore not yet “Shakespeare.” Indeed, the little evidence we have about Shakespeare’s early career suggests that he probably did work in apprentice and service capacities in the London theatre trade, for instance revising the plays of more seasoned dramatists, acting as a book-keeper, or even serving an apprenticeship as a boy actor. Two Gentlemen is among a handful of strong candidates for Shakespeare’s first foray into solo playwriting. Yet despite allegations of its immaturity, Two Gentlemen flourishes in theatrical production. It is a regular part of the rotation at Shakespeare festivals, large and small, around the United States and Canada and has been performed numerous times by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the past several decades. 2011–2012 marks the Shakespeare Theatre Company’s second production of the play in the last 12 years*. How do we explain the discrepancy between Two Gentlemen’s lackluster critical reputation and the success it enjoys as a theatrical piece?

One reason that Two Gentlemen prospers onstage may well be its dogged appeal or, more accurately, its dog appeal. The film Shakespeare in Love (1998) helps us see why. Viewers are likely to remember the movie’s use of Romeo and Juliet, in which Gwyneth Paltrow’s Viola De Lessops performs in disguise and which screens her budding romance with “Will” Shakespeare. But early on the film also depicts a popularly received, if entirely fictional, production of Two Gentlemen at Whitehall Palace for a noble audience which includes Queen Elizabeth. The play includes two scenes in which the servant, Launce, shares the stage with his dog, Crab. The famous Elizabethan clown Will Kempe and a mutt are shown playing one of these scenes to uproarious laughter; afterwards, they receive the Queen’s personal commendation. Looking on from the back of the hall, Philip Henslowe, a major theatrical impresario and playhouse owner in early modern London, comments: “Love and a bit with a dog, that’s what they like.”

It is possible that early performances featured a stuffed animal, represented as “1 black dogge” in a list of props owned by the Admiral’s Men, a rival company to Shakespeare’s, but modern productions, like the film, typically use a live dog. The fact that even well-trained pets can be unpredictable creates ample opportunity for spontaneous humor: will Crab scratch himself indecorously or, as in the case of a Chicago Shakespeare Theater production from 2000, bark at the audience? How will the actor playing Launce react to such improvisations? George Bernard

*Ed note: Third including the Free For All production.
Shaw, who attended a performance in 1895, echoed Shakespeare in Love’s Henslowe in seeing something both irresistible and lowering in such moments: “The scenes between Launce and his dog brought out the latent silliness and childishness of the audience as Shakespeare’s clowning scenes always do: I laugh at them like a yokel myself.” When Launce announces, “I am the dog. No, the dog is himself, and I am the dog. O, the dog is me, and I am myself” (act 2, scene 3), in a sense he speaks for us in the audience. We are drawn to the comic confusion between animal and human even as we dismiss our enjoyment as inadequate to more appropriately “Shakespearean” emotions. The tension that Shaw identifies is central to the mixed legacy that Two Gentlemen carries with it in the theatre.

The sincere but unsettled laughter that Crab provokes is symptomatic of a larger critical problem with Two Gentlemen that somehow translates to theatrical success. The play’s main focus is supposed to be love, specifically the complications that ensue between two young lovesick couples. And yet generations of critics have had trouble swallowing the resolution that Shakespeare devises to the play’s romantic conflicts. The final scene pairs off the lovers through a series of bold, clunky plot machinations. When I teach Two Gentlemen, my students, like critics before them, routinely object to how Act 5 rearranges the lovers, what it does in particular with its women characters and the general hastiness with which it wraps up. But these apparent deficits can become virtues in performance. The abruptness with which these characters fall in and out of love lends itself to the audience’s sharp scrutiny: how substantial is a love that can be so easily assumed and discarded? Proteus declares: “I to myself am dearer than a friend / For love is still precious in itself” (act 2, scene 6), and we immediately sense the rich contradictions between these two propositions. For audiences today, fed on a diet of movie “rom-coms,” Two Gentlemen holds up a clear, often unflattering mirror to conventional narratives of romance, desire, sex and love.

If the play effectively exploits and debunks romantic illusion, it does so largely through the agency of its servant characters in collaboration with the crowd-pleasing Crab. The prominence of servants in Two Gentlemen used to bother some readers, including one critic who sniffed that “Shakespeare gives the maid the best lines.” Although the servants—Launce, Speed and Lucetta—were acknowledged to be funny, they were also perceived as improperly stealing the show from their masters. By the same logic that audiences were supposed to distrust their affection for dogs onstage, they were not supposed to allow the clowning of the servants to distract from the trials and tribulations of the lovers.

There is nothing extraneous about Shakespeare’s use of servant characters in this play, however. Instead, the servants imitate, mock and parody their masters precisely to display their pretensions and weaknesses. In the process, they emerge as characters in their own right, with whom audiences identify strongly through the force of shared laughter. It is revealing that Will Kempe, the most celebrated comic actor of his day, likely did play the part of Launce in early performances. Evidently it was considered a plum part. In allowing servants to take central, rather than peripheral, roles and in depicting them as more masterful, more sympathetic or both than their masters, Two Gentlemen demonstrates strongly that personal identity and dramatic worth cannot be deduced from social position. That simple but elegant idea resonates today, when we readily question what it means to be a gentleman. By the end of the play, we contemplate whether or not the two gentlemen of Verona have lived up to their titles or whether the titles themselves prove empty. We can view Two Gentlemen as an apprentice work in a positive light: a young playwright just embarking on his career tapped into the marginal positions occupied by servants and animals to produce a work of enduring theatrical vibrancy and vitality.
SUGGESTED READING


CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

WINDOWS: Sunday, January 22, 2012, at 5 p.m.
POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION: Wednesday, January 25, 2012
CLASSICS IN CONTEXT: Saturday, February 11, 2012, at 5 p.m.
Charlie Marsden enters the study of his old friend, Professor Leeds. Professor Leeds greets his friend, and they discuss Nina’s recovery from a nervous breakdown triggered by the death of her fiancé, Gordon, in the war. Nina enters, declaring her plans to leave home. Leeds objects and Nina lashes out, accusing her father of destroying her happiness. She is tortured by the fact that he wouldn’t let her marry Gordon when she had the chance, and believes she must become a nurse and sacrifice herself to others to make amends. In the face of her outburst, Leeds yields. Though Charlie wishes she would stay with him, he and Nina go upstairs to pack her things. Leeds is left alone.

More than a year later, Charlie once again enters the study. Professor Leeds has died. Now working as a nurse, Nina arrives with her friend, Doctor Ned Darrell, and they go upstairs to see the body. Another friend, Sam Evans, enters. He explains he has asked Nina to marry him. Sending Sam to fill a prescription, Ned tells Charlie that Nina has been giving her body to every wounded soldier. He believes a marriage to Sam would revive her by giving her a child. Nina wanders in and Ned leaves her with Charlie. Breaking down, Nina confesses her indiscretions, asking to be punished. Charlie comforts her and instructs her to marry Sam. Calmed, she consents and falls asleep.

Nina sits in Sam’s parents’ house. She and Sam have been married for six months and she is pregnant, though she has told no one. Charlie, who is visiting with them, interrupts and then Sam and his mother arrive. Mrs. Evans sends the men into town so that she can speak to Nina. Learning Nina is pregnant, Mrs. Evans insists that Sam and Nina must never have children. She reveals that insanity runs in the Evans family and only keeping the truth from Sam will preserve their happiness. Nina wants to leave Sam, but Mrs. Evans pleads with her, knowing that too would destroy him. Then she makes a suggestion: Nina must find a healthy man to impregnate her, and give her husband a healthy baby.

Several months later, Nina and Sam are back in the Professor’s study. Nina has had an abortion in secret and taken precautions against becoming pregnant again by Sam. Charlie and Ned arrive, and Charlie consults with him about his mother’s illness. Sam and Charlie leave for the store. She confesses the truth about the Sam’s insanity and her abortion. Attempting to be scientific, they reason out the morality of Nina having child by someone else. Nina asks Ned to be the father, and Ned finds himself consenting.

The following April, Nina is in the sitting room of their new house. She feels her unborn child move and thinks of Ned, with whom she has fallen in love. Sam enters and Nina snaps at him, thinking that she must have a divorce. Ned arrives, bringing news of a job for Sam. When they are alone, Nina declares her love to Ned, but he resists. Charlie, whose mother has died, arrives and senses something between Ned and

Eugene O’Neill’s

STRANGE INTERLUDE

Synopsis

Charlie Marsden enters the study of his old friend, Professor Leeds. Professor Leeds greets his friend, and they discuss Nina’s recovery from a nervous breakdown triggered by the death of her fiancé, Gordon, in the war. Nina enters, declaring her plans to leave home. Leeds objects and Nina lashes out, accusing her father of destroying her happiness. She is tortured by the fact that he wouldn’t let her marry Gordon when she had the chance, and believes she must become a nurse and sacrifice herself to others to make amends. In the face of her outburst, Leeds yields. Though Charlie wishes she would stay with him, he and Nina go upstairs to pack her things. Leeds is left alone.
Nina. He goes upstairs, and Nina demands that Ned marry her. Ned insists that they keep their promise to remain detached. Sam returns, and Nina tells him that she and Ned want to talk with him, then exits. Panicked, Ned tells Sam that he’s leaving for Europe and that Sam is going to be a father. When Nina returns, she sees Sam’s joy and cannot destroy him with the truth.

A year later, Nina and Sam sit in their living room. Nina contemplates the happiness the baby has brought them, despite her loss of Ned. Charlie arrives, and mentions seeing Ned in Munich. Sam leaves. The doorbell rings, and Ned arrives. Seeing them together, Charlie immediately realizes the truth of their relationship. Threatened by Ned’s return, he sets out to find Sam. Ned admits he has come back for Nina. Though she still loves him, Nina now refuses to leave Sam; she wants Ned to stay and become her lover. Ned threatens to tell Sam everything, but once he returns, Ned finds he can say nothing.

Eleven years have passed. Ned and Nina sit in her apartment in New York, watching her son, Gordon. Nina and Ned have been caught in an endless cycle of affairs, Ned often fleeing abroad, then returning. Ned begins to make fun of Sam, and Gordon yells at him. Nina sends him out, and she and Ned decide it is time for Ned to leave again before they become bitter. They kiss goodbye, and Gordon sees them from the doorway. Charlie arrives, and he and Nina exit. Gordon returns with a birthday gift from Ned, which he smashes to pieces. He threatens to tell Sam about the kiss, but Ned charges him as a man of honor not to tell. Upset, Ned leaves as Sam arrives. Trying to appease Gordon, Nina scorns Ned.

Ten years later, the family is on the deck of Sam’s yacht, waiting to watch Gordon compete in a crew race. Nina snipes at Gordon’s young fiancée, Madeline. Appalled that Gordon has proposed, Nina vows to do anything to squash the marriage. She charges Ned to tell Sam the truth, but he refuses. Everyone returns to watch the end of the race. Nina is about to tell Madeline that her marriage can’t take place, but Ned stops her. Charlie, wanting to hear why, pushes Nina, and she tells him everything. The boats race to the finish and Gordon wins. Crazy with joy, Sam suddenly collapses. Seeing he’s going to need care, Nina resolves to sacrifice herself for him once again.

Several months later, Sam is dead. Gordon and Madeline sit on the terrace, and he confesses that he always suspected Nina loved Ned, not his father. Madeline comforts him, and Charlie stumbles in on them. Sending Nina and Ned out to talk to Gordon, Madeline and Charlie exit. Gordon informs Ned that Sam bequeathed a large sum to Ned’s research station and Ned tries to refuse it. They argue and Gordon slaps Ned. Nina cries out that Ned is Gordon’s father. Gordon misunderstands, apologizes, gives them his blessing and leaves. Ned asks Nina to marry him, knowing she will say no, and advises her to marry Charlie. Nina and Charlie agree to marry and Ned leaves for good. Weary, Nina and Charlie discuss the past and settle down to a quiet future.
“Eugenic O’Neill” and *Strange Interlude* by Tamsen Wolff

Eugene O’Neill maintained that the only subject for drama to address was “man’s struggle...with himself, his own past.” As early as his first full-length play, *Beyond the Horizon* (1918), O’Neill created a modern version of ancient tragedy driven by intermingled hereditary, environmental and psychological forces, rather than by a larger, more abstract concept of fate. O’Neill wanted “to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage.” Heredity, with its accompanying symbols, terms and controversies, is invariably one of these important modern values.

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In order to contemplate explicit questions of heredity in the early 20th century, O’Neill had to take on questions of eugenics. Claiming to be dedicated to “the improvement of the human race through better breeding,” the American eugenics movement enjoyed unparalleled popularity between 1900 and 1930. Predicated on the newly rediscovered Mendelian theory of heredity, eugenic rhetoric was pervasive and strongly emphasized biological determinism. The pressing historical and social contingencies that helped to produce eugenics included unprecedented levels of immigration: mass African-American migration.

In his review of the original 1928 production of *Strange Interlude*, critic Walter Winchell neatly identified the play’s central concern and O’Neill’s preoccupation with heredity by announcing: “Another Eugenic O’Neill Baby.” Here drama merges with eugenics—the idea of hereditary improvement by controlled selective breeding—in O’Neill’s name. Winchell’s easy recognition of the presence of eugenics in the play suggests that the play’s now-scorned melodrama about heredity not only was understood differently in early productions, but also that the ideas of eugenics had a special resonance for O’Neill. Winchell’s witticism ties O’Neill’s curiosity about hereditary experimentation directly to the playwright’s dramatic experimentation.

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4 Ibid.
to Northern cities; the women’s rights movement, and especially the related issues of reproductive rights and sexual freedom; rapid urbanization; and the First World War. The eruption of eugenic ideas responded to the resulting instability of national, class, gender and racial boundaries.

The eugenic popularization of Mendelian heredity provided a particularly stimulating environment in which to tackle questions about heredity and the past. For O’Neill, who was interested in developing complex relationships between the past and present on stage, eugenic insistence on the visibility and the force of the past in the embodied present offered a ready resource. O’Neill also shared with eugenicists an abiding concern with visibility and spectatorship. In eugenic theory, there is a vital tension between hidden truth (for eugenicists, usually ominous, recessive genetic secrets) and visible truth, or dominant genetic history displayed on the body. For eugenicists, this tension creates an unsettling vacillation between an assurance about what is clearly visible on the body and dread about what lurks unseen in the body. Of course, in theatre, a tension between hidden truth and visible truth is a playwright’s natural playground, affecting everything from dramaturgy, to stage design, to the place of the audience, to the theories and practice of acting.

Strange Interlude takes nine long acts to play out the hereditary scope of the story, which follows four central characters from 1919 to 1945. The practical reason for the play’s length is the copious use of an old stage convention—the aside—since the characters’ inner thoughts are often spoken out loud, unheard by the other characters, and interspersed with their audible dialogue. This device signaled an engagement with the new and sensational field of psychoanalysis, which contributed significantly to the play’s popularity. At the same time, the primary concern of the play is the extensive, shaping past, and what will be transmitted to the future. When Nina appears in the first act, she is unhinged by the loss of her fiancé Gordon, a pilot killed in WWI, but even more so by her lack of a child. The play’s obsession with reproduction is evident in its nine-act length, and here anxiety about reproduction and how (and what) qualities are passed from one generation to the next rests on a eugenic storyline. The plot turns on a two-part eugenic conviction that is articulated in the third act. The first part, or the problem, is an unquestioned belief in congenital insanity, and the second, or the proposed cure, is the resulting necessity of breeding for eugenically healthy offspring. In addition, the play’s uneasiness about reproduction is steadily fostered by a diffuse collection of ideas and terminology common to eugenic rhetoric. These ideas are most often laid out in dichotomies, which include questions of health and sickness (both mental and physical) and visible surfaces and hidden depths.

O’Neill’s ambitious effort to grapple with these questions brought him unprecedented public acclaim. Opening on January 30, 1928, Strange Interlude was a national phenomenon. It ran for an impressive 17 months at the John Golden Theatre in New York, before two touring companies took it on the road for three more seasons. The play’s first printing of 20,000 copies sold rapidly, and the play held its place on the national best-seller list for many months, eventually earning O’Neill his third Pulitzer Prize. Moreover, the play brought O’Neill unparalleled financial reward: the production, combined with the movie rights, netted the playwright $275,000, the most money he ever made from a single play. Written about extensively in newspapers and magazines across the country, Strange Interlude raked in glowing reviews; the majority of critics hailed Strange Interlude as an unmatched dramatic accomplishment. Even J. Brooks Atkinson, who disliked the play, conceded that O’Neill, in his failed experimentation, was “performing the most vital service possible to
American drama. Devotees or detractors, almost all critics agreed on the national importance of Strange Interlude.

Strange Interlude and its critics also helped to contribute to the circulation and recognition of various eugenic ideas, while, significantly, emphasizing the contradictions within those ideas. O’Neill sets up and then repeatedly questions a powerful social myth of good and bad bloodlines in Strange Interlude. The bad bloodline belongs to Bessie Evans, and the good, to Gordon Shaw; both are looming, unseen figures whose genetic legacies influence the action of the play. But O’Neill produces versions of the past that are challenged and re-imagined in the present. The struggle over hereditary myths, which denies the possibility of an objective version of the past, dominates the play. In this way, O’Neill begins to forge a new dramatic form by using imperfect, contested versions of the past to disrupt and drive the action of the play. In debating the force of the past in the present, O’Neill gradually transforms the conventional dramatic structure of exposition, complication, climax and resolution. As O’Neill develops as a playwright, he places increased emphasis on looking backward at the chain of events that have led to the characters’ present until scouring the past in order to comprehend the present constitutes the action of his plays, an approach that culminates in his masterwork, Long Day’s Journey Into Night (1956). Finally, in Strange Interlude, O’Neill completely undermines the conventionally climactic revelation of paternity, that hallmark of 19th-century melodrama. When in the final moments of the play Nina bursts forth with the play’s 20-year-old guilty secret, her literal identification is understood only as a figure of speech. The declaration has no impact on the action and reveals nothing. Here, O’Neill both relies on the appearance of traditional dramatic suspense and mocks it. His new version of ongoing, irresolvable dramatic suspense lies in the audience’s struggle (alongside the characters) to determine which versions of the past are more or less true. Movement away from conventional dramatic structure means not simply that O’Neill was expanding the possibilities of dramatic form, but that the resulting plays place new demands on theatrical spaces to accommodate them, new demands on actors to inhabit them and new demands on audiences to make meaning from them.

The eugenic version of heredity mirrored and extended a cultural anxiety about how to decide what would be carried forward from the past to the present and the future. When J. Brooks Atkinson argued, “what prevents Strange Interlude from being a great play is just this cramping intrusion of the tenets of science,” he confirmed more recent opinion about the play; his criticism is undoubtedly one of the main reasons that the play has not been regarded as one of O’Neill’s best since WWII. In 1928, however, the audience wanted to see precisely what Atkinson objects to, and often they wanted to see it more than once. In Strange Interlude, audiences were watching the characters’ repeated, constrained attempts both to contest and reinforce the causality of the past. Given the flawed forces of heredity in O’Neill’s play, arguably audiences were looking to theatre as much to contradict as to uphold the vision of linear causality that the eugenics movement asserted. What Strange Interlude provided was an active, repeated playing out, in the immediate present, of hereditary concerns, and eugenics fed both desires and anxieties about what would be transmitted to a postwar generation. At the same time, in drawing on the phenomenon of eugenics and exploiting its inherent tensions, O’Neill began to rethink the shape and effect of drama.

8 Ibid.
SUGGESTED READING


CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

ASIDESLIVE SYMPOSIUM: Sunday, April 1, 2012, 10 a.m.–1 p.m.
WINDOWS: Sunday, April 1, 2012, at 5 p.m.
DIVINING SHAKESPEARE: Wednesday, April 4, 2012, at 5 p.m.
POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION: Wednesday, April 4, 2012
CLASSICS IN CONTEXT: Saturday, April 21, 2012, at 5 p.m.
It is a bright morning in Venice, and the young couple, Silvio and Clarice, have just been given permission to marry. Clarice had previously been engaged to another man, Federigo Rasponi, but his sudden death has freed her to marry her true love. Clarice’s father Pantalone, Silvio’s father Doctor Lombardi and the innkeeper Brighella stand by as witnesses. A knock at the door interrupts the happy scene. Smeraldina, Clarice’s maid, brings in Truffaldino, a quirky servant with disastrous news—his master, Federigo Rasponi, isn’t dead after all! And he’s here in Venice! A man enters, declaring himself to be Federigo Rasponi and demanding to marry Clarice. Pantalone feels obliged to uphold the original engagement, much to the distress of his daughter, Silvio and Doctor Lombardi.

Meanwhile, the innkeeper Brighella draws Federigo aside—and reveals that he recognizes Federigo’s true identity. The person dressed as Federigo is actually Beatrice, Federigo’s sister. Federigo was indeed killed in a duel by Beatrice’s fiancé, Florindo, who then fled to Venice. Beatrice has followed him, hoping to collect her brother’s money from Pantalone. Outside the inn, the always-hungry Truffaldino waits in the street fantasizing about food. His master Federigo—who he has no idea is really Beatrice—doesn’t feed him nearly enough. Therefore, he decides that the best course would be to find another master to serve as well. Two masters, double the food! At just this moment a man enters, struggling with his luggage: it is Florindo. Truffaldino offers to serve him, and Florindo agrees. The servant Truffaldino now has two masters.

Truffaldino’s first job for his masters is to go to the post office for their mail. Unfortunately, Truffaldino can’t read, and the letters get mixed up. Florindo reads Beatrice’s letter and learns that she’s in Venice dressed as a man. Delighted, he runs off to find her. Pantalone arrives with a bag of money, which he hands to Truffaldino for his “master.” Truffaldino doesn’t know which “master” Pantalone means and mistakenly gives it to Florindo, though it was intended for Federigo. Meanwhile, Clarice begs her father to release her from the engagement to Federigo. The disguised Beatrice arrives and asks to speak with Clarice in private. Once they are alone, Beatrice reveals her true identity. Clarice is greatly relieved and tells her father that she will now consent to marry “Federigo.” Unfortunately, Silvio doesn’t know the happy news. Enraged at the loss of his love, he attacks Pantalone and accuses Clarice of being faithless. Deeply hurt, Clarice prepares to kill herself. Luckily, her maid Smeraldina arrives just in time to stop her.

At last it’s time for lunch. Both Florindo and “Federigo” order their meals at the same time, and Truffaldino finds himself in a jam. Can he keep both masters satisfied while also finding time to stuff his own face? Smeraldina arrives, and Truffaldino, who had previously noticed the pretty maid, declares his love for her. He discovers that she feels the same. More mix-ups lead Beatrice and Florindo to believe that the other one is dead. In despair, they run out of the inn at the same time, ready to take their own lives. But just as they are about to plunge in the knives, they see... each other! They embrace, delirious with joy. Silvio and Clarice are reunited, and even Truffaldino is forgiven for daring to try to serve two masters at once. Oh, happiness, once more!

*Synopsis courtesy of Yale Repertory Theatre, written by Madeline Miller, original production dramaturg.*
“If we are to make plays of commedia dell’arte, we shall want to make them well.” So insists the fictional Placida, a leading actress depicted in Carlo Goldoni’s play *The Comic Theatre*.

Her sentiment seems obvious enough, but—like commedia itself—it merits a second look.

For starters, this sentence penned in 1750 is often cited as the first appearance of the term *commedia dell’arte*. Though the tradition of *Commedia* had begun in Italy more than 200 years earlier, it was previously known by other names: *The Improvised Theatre*, *The Zanni-esque Theatre* (with reference to bumbling servants called *Zanni*, from whom we get the English word “zany”), *The Theatre of Masks*, or—more widely in Europe—simply, *The Italian Comedy*. It was Goldoni who popularized a new and lasting name for the art form: *commedia dell’arte*, which is best translated into English as *Professional Theatre* (with *Arte* denoting “skill, technique, craft, or profession”). Ironically, Goldoni, whose name is forever linked with the *commedia*, coined the phrase to describe a style of theatre that he did not like.

Goldoni’s dissatisfaction with *commedia dell’arte* raises a larger issue embedded in Placida’s plea, an issue that still plagues modern comic artists: What is the measure of a well-made comedy? Is it enough to do as Donald O’Connor insists in *Singin’ in the Rain* and “Make ’em laugh”? Or, if we agree with Placida and want to make our plays well, must we do something more?
This question undergirded the positive critical reception of Christopher Bayes’ *The Servant of Two Masters* when it premiered at Yale Repertory Theatre in 2010. Reviewers unanimously insisted that the play was funny—genuinely funny. They guaranteed a good time and promised audiences, “It has you belly laughing yourself silly.” (Begelman, David, *The News-Times*, 2010).

However, most critics verged on apologia when insisting that the play was not mere empty guffaws, but rather something more. They wrote urgent disclaimers to assure readers that the silliness was something sophisticated. Surely a cultural icon as venerable as Yale Repertory Theatre (or the lauded Shakespeare Theatre Company, for that matter) would not subject its patrons to something so frivolous as a good time! No, this play, critics assured their audiences, is *commedia dell’arte*, but it is *commedia dell’arte* “made well.” Not merely “funny” but also “enchanting” and “magical.”

Rave reviews are nothing new for *commedia dell’arte*. Five-hundred-year-old audience reports describe a similar sense of enchantment and magic. The tradition grew out of necessity and invention, when, around the 1520s, Italian comic actors began to create models for achieving that elusive dream: to make a living in the arts. The resulting work not only kept them fed, but it revolutionized drama throughout Europe, spawning many innovations that are now taken for granted. Italian *Commedians* signed the earliest documents of incorporation recognizing performance as an industry and the theatre “company” as a business entity. These artist-entrepreneurs were the first to employ women on the professional stage, a regular occurrence in Italy 100 years before it would become standard practice in England. Touring companies played to every major court from Queen Elizabeth’s London (1602) to Empress Anna’s Moscow (1733), and Italian Comedy was at the vanguard of modern, trans-national business. For its contributions to the theatrical profession alone it is fitting that Goldoni dubbed the style *commedia dell’arte*: Theatre of the Professional.

As for the product, 16th- and 17th-century *commedia dell’arte* performers set new standards in dramatic technique and audience members described witnessing a theatrical virtuosity never seen before. Touring companies brought the rich heritage of Italian stories, characters and dramaturgy to the rest of Europe, helping to fuel the Golden Age in Spain and the Renaissance in France and England. Their legacy inspired subsequent entertainers as distinct as Mozart and the Marx Brothers.

Scholarly consensus has highlighted myriad ways in which Elizabethan dramas (including the plays of Shakespeare himself) are indebted to *commedia* conventions, and it is likely that Shakespeare’s famous clown Will Kempe traded professional secrets with Italian *Commedians* on tour in England.

In France, the connection was stronger still as Italian companies made Paris a permanent home, occasionally sharing venues with Molière. The French playwright was quick to “share” their material as well, borrowing heavily from the *commedia* repertoire in the creation of a French national theatre.

By the mid-18th-century, Italian artists like Goldoni lamented that their own native theatre paled in comparison to their European rivals, whose national dramatic traditions had blossomed after, ironically, taking root in soil fertilized by earlier Italian tours. Within Italy, however, innovation had apparently slowed and *commedia* was on the wane.

In *The Comic Theatre*, Goldoni’s mouthpiece Placida describes the situation:

> The world is bored with always seeing the same things, with always hearing the same words, and the audiences know what Arlecchino is about to say before he even opens his mouth. (act 1, scene 2)

To Goldoni, this “Professional Theatre” had grown stale and commercial, marked by predictable improvisations, hackneyed knockabouts and
ubiquitous scatological humor. Apparently the artist-entrepreneurs had lost the hunger that had first prompted their ancestors to innovate.

Goldoni responded with a self-described mission of “reform,” a project which he details in his Memoirs. In his view, Commedia had given a propitious birth to modern theatre, but it was high time for the Italian stage to grow up. The Venetian lawyer-turned-playwright planned to lead this painful maturation himself, waging war on three fronts.

First, Goldoni worked with renowned commedia actors of his day, whose careers had been built on improvisation, but he dared to give them scripts, insisting as Shakespeare had done 150 years earlier that the actors “speak no more than is set down for them.” Detractors claimed that the playwright was squelching creative fire, but literarily-minded audiences agreed that Goldoni’s poetry and crafted narratives were an improvement over improvised texts.

In his scripts, then, Goldoni attempted to shift the theatrical style from “farces” to “comedies of character.” In his view, the farce was built on theatrical conventions—tired gags and worn-out shells of archetypes named Arlecchino, Brighella, the Doctor and Pantalone. These stock characters had once been unique creations by innovative actors, but after two centuries of use the old types were verging on cliché. Goldoni hoped that a new “comedy of character” would revive the theatre with a sense of realism and particularity drawn from modern, middle-class life: merchants, courtiers, waiters, porters and the like—real people presented not as types but as individuals.

The last and most controversial of Goldoni’s reforms was a slap to the very face of Italian culture: he began to require that his actors perform without their venerated leather masks. Commedia—the so-called Comedy of Masks—had flourished based on a system of character masks, and the material culture of the leather mask was a source of Italian popular pride, even outside of the realm of theatre.

In some cases, the public responded with rage, and Goldoni describes being accosted by people who accused him of killing their culture by daring to present unmasked comic actors. Goldoni, however, saw himself as a harbinger of the future, insisting that modern, realistic theatre required a nuance, a pliability and a life that the mask would not allow: “The actor must, in our days, possess a soul; and the soul under a mask is like a fire under ashes.”

Some theorists still say that Goldoni killed commedia. In his words, he merely reformed it. Either way, his work helped to shape a new Italian national theatre based on more realistic characters, more naturalistic representations and the primacy of the playwright over the actor. As Shakespeare was to 16th-century London, as Molière was to 17th-century Paris, so Goldoni was to 18th-century Venice. It is worth remembering, however, that all three of these legendary poets built their craft on the backs of comic actors from Renaissance Italy. Poor players strutting and fretting their life upon the stage with one simple goal, a goal shared by Truffaldino in Servant: to work hard enough to gain a bite to eat.

Hunger and hard work. Heartache and happiness. These are the basic ingredients of commedia dell’arte, and of Goldoni’s The Servant of Two Masters. Servant is one of Goldoni’s earliest plays, in which Commedia clearly exerts its lasting influence and the innovations that would mark his later career are only faintly prefigured. Nevertheless, the playwright demonstrates his care for the genre and his love of the characters by painting broad comedy in gentle brushstrokes. It is funny, yes—audiences laughed at the commedia when it first revolutionized theatre in the 1500s; they laughed through Goldoni’s reforms of the 1700s; and they are still laughing today—but it is also something more. Familiar but spectacular, universal but particular. Silly, yes, but also “enchanting” and “magical.” This is commedia dell’arte “made well.”
SUGGESTED READING


CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

WINDOWS: Sunday, May 20, 2012, at 5 p.m.

POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION: Wednesday, May 23, 2012

CLASSICS IN CONTEXT: Saturday, June 9, 2012, at 5 p.m.
William Shakespeare’s
THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR
Synopsis

Justice Shallow, Master Slender and Sir Hugh Evans walk to the house of Master Page. Shallow fumes about the antics of Sir John Falstaff and Evans brings up the proposed marriage between Slender and Anne Page. They go in to Page’s house while Slender lingers. Anne emerges to fetch Slender to dinner but he refuses, making a feeble attempt at wooing. Master Page is forced to come out and fetch them both. After dinner, Evans sends his servant Simple to Mistress Quickly, requesting her help in the making the match.

Later, at the Garter Inn, Falstaff announces his plans to seduce Mistress Ford and Mistress Page. His men refuse to help him and decide to reveal his plot to the women’s husbands. At her house, Mistress Quickly promises Simple that she will encourage Anne Page to marry Slender. Doctor Caius, her master, demands to know Simple’s business there. Since Caius is also in love with Anne, he sends Evans a challenge to fight. After he leaves, Master Fenton arrives to beg Quickly’s help in wooing Anne. Quickly realizes she has promised to help all three men.

Mistress Page enters, reading Falstaff’s love letter. Appalled, she vows revenge. Mistress Ford arrives with an identical letter and they decide to punish him and withdraw to discuss. Their husbands, Ford and Page, speak with Pistol and Nim, who divulge Falstaff’s plan. Mistresses Page and Ford return and seeing Mistress Quickly choose her to be their messenger to Falstaff. Shallow and the Host of the Garter Inn appear announcing the imminent fight between Evans and Caius. Though Page trusts his wife, Ford resolves to uncover Mistress Ford’s infidelity by talking to Falstaff in disguise.

Quickly brings Falstaff an invitation to visit Mistress Ford. She leaves and Ford arrives in disguise, calling himself Brook. He offers to pay Falstaff to seduce Mistress Ford. Falstaff agrees, revealing he already has plans to meet her. Enraged, Ford vows to catch them in the act.

Out in a field, Caius waits for Evans to arrive for their duel. Shallow and the Host try to persuade him to forget the challenge. The Host promises to bring him to Anne Page and he consents. At the same time, Evans wanders through the fields with Simple. Finally encountering each other, they almost fight but soon agree the Host has plotted against both of them.

Ford encounters Shallow, Page, Slender, Caius, Evans and the Host, who are discussing Anne’s possible marriage. Page is for Slender but Mistress Page prefers Caius. They both think Fenton is unsuitable.

Mistress Ford instructs her servants to be ready to take the laundry basket and empty it into the Thames. Mistress Page hides as Falstaff arrives. He pledges his love to Mistress Ford until Mistress Page bursts in heralding Ford’s return. They hide Falstaff in the laundry basket and call the servants to take him away.
Ford arrives, convinced he will find his wife with Falstaff, but discovers no one. Gleefully, the wives resolve to call Falstaff back for more.

Anne encourages Fenton to keep seeking her father’s approval. Shallow and Slender arrive and do their best to court Anne. Anne’s parents send Fenton away, despite his pleading.

Soaked and groaning, Falstaff returns to the Inn. Quickly arrives, inviting him back to Mistress Ford’s. He reluctantly agrees. Ford returns as Brook and Falstaff recounts for him his adventure and reveals that he is already late for his next date. He rushes out.

Quickly and Mistress Page walk to Mistress Ford’s house. Falstaff is already there and Mistress Page again announces Ford’s arrival. They decide to dress Falstaff like the fat woman of Brentford. Mistress Ford hopes that Ford will see Falstaff in disguise, because Ford swears the woman is a witch and despises her. As predicted, Ford sees the veiled Falstaff and flies into a rage. He chases him out, beating him as he goes.

The wives tell their husbands of their plots against Falstaff. Ford asks forgiveness for his jealousy and Page suggests one more public humiliation of Falstaff. Mistress Page suggests that they disguise Falstaff as a spirit that is said to haunt the woods and ambush him with public mockery. Page hopes that during the confusion, Slender and Anne can elope. Mistress Page makes the same plan for Caius.

At the Inn, Quickly apologizes to Falstaff on behalf of Mistresses Page and Ford and invites him to meet them again. Fenton asks for the Host’s help in finding a vicar, as Anne and Fenton mean to trick both parents and be married that evening. Falstaff returns, having agreed to meet the women in disguise at Herne’s oak. Ford, disguised as Brook, enters and Falstaff bids him follow him to the oak that evening.

That night everyone hides in the woods. Mistresses Page and Ford greet Falstaff but, hearing a noise, quickly flee. Children dressed as fairies spring out of hiding, along with Mistress Quickly dressed as the fairy queen. Falstaff cowers and they burn him with candles. In the chaos, Caius steals a boy in green and Slender a boy in white. Both assume the boys are Anne, while Fenton flees with the real Anne. As the children withdraw, the couples enter and tease Falstaff, who admits his misdeeds. Page invites Falstaff to a wedding feast for his daughter, divulging the elopement. Slender returns, admitting he stole a boy by mistake. Mistress Page assures her husband that she thwarted the plan and Anne has married Caius, until Caius enters and reveals he also stole a boy. Fenton and Anne arrive, married, and Page and Mistress Page surrender to the course of love. Happily, they all return to Windsor to feast.
Shakespeare’s England—Where Money Definitely Matters

by Peter Grav

Often overlooked in discussions of Shakespearean comedies, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* merits much more consideration than it is traditionally given. This mid-career work is arguably important in two ways. First, while the dating of the play is inexact, it is safe to say that this was Shakespeare’s last broad, laugh-inducing play, his final pure non-“problem” comedy. Indeed, the play contains some of Shakespeare’s finest farcical moments, in particular the two scenes of Falstaff’s “assignations” with Mistress Ford. Anticipation is often cited as an essential component of comedy, and in that respect *Merry Wives* delivers—the staging of Ford twice arriving in triumph only to be thwarted as well as Falstaff escaping in humiliating fashion each time can produce riotous physical comedy. The second and most significant aspect of *Merry Wives* lies in it being the only play that Shakespeare recognizably set in his own contemporary society. As such, the play provides unique insight into how Shakespeare may have regarded the world in which he lived. This is Shakespeare’s England, and it seems evident that money is on everyone’s mind and that cash values,
rather than human ones, are firmly in control. In The Merry Wives of Windsor, we are invited to look beyond surface appearances and realize that, from respectable middle-class citizens to a seeming paragon of a male romantic lead, greed holds sway.

The idea that wealth had become both the measure of personal worth and a societal lynchpin seems central in Merry Wives, a play in which economic imperatives are never far from the surface. Falstaff dissolves his retinue and pursues the titular wives because he is penniless; Ford throws money at Falstaff to test his wife's fidelity, and Anne Page's matrimonial fate is governed by the wealth she represents and the capital she attracts. The inclination of some to view Merry Wives as Shakespeare's foray into Citizen or City Comedy seems apt, given that genre's preoccupation with economic motivations and the trickery required to accumulate wealth. In both the main and subplot of Merry Wives, subterfuge driven by greed appears to be a societal norm. Yet the cynicism we expect from City Comedy (such as what's found in the works of Ben Jonson or Thomas Middleton) is mitigated to a degree by the resolution of the play's main plot in which lessons appear to be learned and the forces of avarice are seemingly turned back.

Of course, the presence of Falstaff, one of Shakespeare's greatest characters, is part of the play's attraction, but this Falstaff seems different from the man we encounter in the Henry IV plays. One might expect that the anachronistic thrusting of him into this bourgeois society would result in a puncturing of its pretensions and values similar to the way that notions of honor and duty come under attack in the Henry plays; instead, it is Falstaff's pretensions that are deflated by economic reality, and he embarks upon his ultimately humiliating seduction of Mistress Ford simply because he is broke. Moreover, if Falstaff represents a threat to the status quo in The Merry Wives of Windsor, it is a small threat indeed as the titular wives see through his schemes from the beginning. In fact, the defeat of Falstaff seems so effortless that one might ask whether he ever did represent a threat to Windsor's values. Under the direction of Page, this society is fundamentally secure and self- assured. The Fords and Pages are, in effect, local patricians in their urban world without need of title, the traditional marker of status. They, along with Shallow, Slender, Evans and Doctor Caius, are all representatives of an English bourgeoisie (the latter two in spite of their Welsh and French pedigrees, respectively) that was growing in strength and number during Shakespeare's lifetime. Ford's jealously aside, these are supremely self-confident representatives of a society that seem to always factor the economic into their thinking. Perhaps for this reason, Friedrich Engels commented in an 1873 letter to Karl Marx that "the first act of the Merry Wives alone contains more life and reality than all German literature."

The main plot of Merry Wives may indicate that mirth, wit, common sense and an amiable sociability trumps man's mercenary tendencies, but everything beyond its surface suggests the opposite. Windsorites may be easily able to ward off Falstaff, but, in their egocentricity, they seem unaware of the extent to which they embody his values. For example, Ford's dedication to the economic matrix is evident in his first encounter with Sir John; he is well aware that the prospect of cash is enough to enlist Falstaff's help, but he goes further and provides a supremely jaded philosophic slant on the way of the world, stating baldly that "if money goes before, all ways do lie open" (act 2, scene 2). While Sir John's reply, “Money is a good soldier, and will on”, bestows a somewhat questionable dignity upon cash values by invoking military valor, this trade-off of mercenary catchphrases effectively renders the two men equal. Even near the play's end, instead of taking part in the happy resolution and rejoicing at the confirmation of his wife's virtue, Ford insists on bringing economics to the fore with his demand that Falstaff repay him the funds he had advanced.

The romantic subplot of The Merry Wives of Windsor offers further strong evidence that, in Windsor, money makes the world go round. In the great comedies that precede this play, such as As You
Like It, Twelfth Night and Much Ado About Nothing, economic considerations never rear their head in the love stories. In this play, however, the ultimate importance of our erstwhile heroine, Anne Page, lies in what she is, rather than who she is. This is decidedly no epilogue-delivering Rosalind; what Anne may or may not have to say is of little consequence as her attraction seems to lie in the 700 pounds she will inherit when she turns 17. The conversation in Merry Wives’ opening scene amongst Evans, Shallow and Slender pointedly configures Anne as a lucrative commodity on the marriage market. Meanwhile, our ostensible romantic hero, the bankrupt Fenton, admits that Anne’s wealth was the original reason he courted her and then tries to assure her that he doesn’t only have economic interests at heart; however, when he does so by affirming that her “value” is higher than “stamps in gold or sums in sealed bags” (act 3, scene 4), one can be forgiven for thinking that money is never far from his mind. For his part, Anne’s father, the reliably sensible Page, certainly believes that Fenton is little more than a fortune-hunter. Similar to other Shakespearean works with multiple or parallel plots, the two separate storylines that run through Merry Wives mirror and reinforce each other. Upon examination, Fenton’s pursuit of the wealthy Anne seems remarkably similar to Falstaff’s designs on Mistresses Ford and Page. Far from offering up an idealized romance as a counterpoint to Falstaff’s mercenary courtship schemes, the Fenton-Anne subplot appears to reinforce ideas present in the main plot. Even in their names, Falstaff and Fenton seem to echo each other.

When it comes to Merry Wives’ romantic plot, it’s not only Fenton who seems to have money on his mind. Presumably, the only reason Anne’s father favors the simple-minded Slender’s suit is the latter’s lucrative land holdings. Anne has obviously been briefed on the expected payout that will come from marrying Slender, and her disgust for her father’s economic maneuvering is evident: “This is my father’s choice. / O, what a world of vile ill-favoured faults / Looks handsome in three hundred pounds a year!” (act 3, scene 4). For her part, the no-nonsense Mistress Page also turns her daughter into a commodity when she discloses her own scheme to see Anne wedded to the older linguistically-challenged Dr. Caius. The reason? In her words: “The Doctor is well moneyed, and his friends potent at court.” She even goes so far to say that Anne will marry Caius even if “twenty thousand worthier come to crave her” (act 4, scene 4). Obviously, Anne is hers to dispose of in a manner that will bring the greatest return, regardless of the Doctor’s suitability. In the end, it seems fair to ask whether her principles as well differ that much from the fortune-hunting Falstaff.

If Shakespeare intended the Windsor he created to reflect his contemporary England’s social mores, then it seems he thought that money was a central driving force for human behavior. Practically everyone in Merry Wives is motivated by economic considerations; and, in Shakespeare’s only “English” play, their value system seems to be sorely wanting. In this respect, the play seems more relevant than ever when we consider, how in the early years of the 21st century, we have seen the near-disastrous consequences of the relentless pursuit of monetary gain. While fortune-hunting knights and dowries may be a long way from Enron and sub-prime mortgages, Shakespeare, once again, provides us with valuable food for thought in our ongoing consideration of the human condition.
SUGGESTED READING


CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

**WINDOWS:** Sunday, June 17, 2012, at 5 p.m.

**POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION:** Wednesday, June 20, 2012

**CLASSICS IN CONTEXT:** Saturday, July 7, 2012, at 5 p.m.
CREDITS

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