

Sample materials from *The Guide to the Season's Plays*

Critical Essay, *The Imaginary Invalid*, Virginia Scott

Rumor has long had it that Molière died on stage in February 1673 while performing the leading role in his last play, *The Imaginary Invalid*. He did not. He died a few hours later, at home in his bed, as the result of a hemorrhage he suffered during the play's musical finale. The irony of a dying actor playing an "imaginary" invalid has always given this play an added dimension, especially when Argan, originally played by Molière, rails against that "idiot Molière," adding: "If I were a doctor, I'd be revenged for his impertinence. When he was ill, I'd leave him to die without help. ... I would say to him 'Die, die, die like a dog, that will teach you to trifle with the Faculty of Medicine.'"

Doctors were one of the targets of Molière's satire even before the beginning in 1666 of his own long siege with tuberculosis. *The Flying Doctor*, an adaptation of a *commedia dell'arte* farce, was written before 1659. His first significant attack on the profession came, however, in *Don Juan* in January 1665. Molière's character, Sganarelle, disguised as a doctor, tries to persuade his skeptical master of the efficacy of a popular medication, emetic wine. "There was a man who had been dying for almost a week. Nobody could think of what else to prescribe, all remedies had failed. Finally someone suggested giving him some emetic wine." "He recovered?" asks Don Juan. "No," says Sganarelle. "He died." The Don sarcastically proclaims this to be an "admirable result." "What?" responds the offended Sganarelle. "For six straight days he couldn't die, but the wine killed him right off. Would you want anything to be more effective?" This was written shortly before the death of Molière's friend, the abbé Le Mothe Le Vayer, in September 1665, possibly from being treated with emetic wine. In that same month Molière entertained the court with "a little impromptu," proposed, written, rehearsed, and performed in five days. This was *Love's the Doctor*, where the hypocrisy of the medical profession is revealed when four consultants hold a private conversation. M. Filerin, the senior and most important of the four, tells his colleagues: "Thanks to Heaven people are infatuated with us, so let us not disabuse them, let us profit from their stupidity. We are not the only ones, as you know, to prey on human weaknesses ... but the greatest weakness of men is..."

Shaw Suggested Reading List

Elsie B. Adams, ed. *Critical Essays on George Bernard Shaw*. New York: G.K. Hall, 1991.

Charles A. Berst. *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Drama*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973 (full studies of ten major plays).

Harold Bloom. *George Bernard Shaw's Major Barbara: Modern Critical Interpretations*. New York: Chelsea, 1988.

"The Size of Dreaming": Aspects of Imagination in this Season's Plays

Season overview

By Akiva Fox, Literary Associate, Shakespeare Theatre Company

The arts arise from imagination. Although artists work by observing the world around them, they must imagine and create new worlds out of nothing, as William Shakespeare details in his play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

But the artistic act does not end with giving shape to insubstantial imagination; rather, artists demand an additional layer of imagination from their audiences. In Shakespeare's time, his plays were staged on a bare platform. As a result, setting the scene depended upon the power of his language to inspire what he called the "imaginary forces" of the spectators.

This season, the Shakespeare Theatre Company presents eight plays that treat on the triumphs and failures of imagination. The leading characters, dreamers all, seek to shape their worlds to match their imaginations. Bolstered by enormous ambition, they remake their homes, their cities, and even whole empires. But inevitably, their noble ideals and immense imaginations encounter cold reality. In these plays, the collision of one character's imagined world with the real world illuminates the extent to which imagination combines equal parts self-determination and self-delusion.

The characters in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* trade in imagination. In order to achieve their aims, they imagine new identities and realities; master and servant switch identities, suitors disguise themselves as teachers, and a poor pedant becomes a rich father. In particular, the men...