

Molière on Stage

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What's So Funny?

Robert W. Goldsby



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Dedicated to Angela Paton who has shared my life on stage,
backstage, and in countless audiences as well as in every
word and comma of this book.

CURTAIN RAISER

What happens when the dramatic art of Molière is unloosed on stages and Past and Present come together to create new life? My intention is to lead the reader to discover just that: what happens when Molière's silent lines of text are transformed into a noisy play in a three dimensional space. I write having been, like Molière, an actor, director and theater manager. A director and a playwright both know the conventions of theater craft; both know the spaces in which actor and audience meet. But above all, the originating playwright and his subsequent interpreters desire to create communal life through an ecstatic experience shared with other human beings. Theater is a form of communion. It answers a need for union that is deep and universal. It was what held the aboriginal motionless in the circle as he watched his shaman enact the lion's bloody death and they both became that lion. That union was once evoked with pity and terror before the altars of Dionysus. The French loved to suffer through it to the hot alexandrines of *le feu* and it made Englishmen's hearts beat as one as they gloried in the freedom of their iambic pentameter. It was eagerly sought by enthusiastic hippies in LSD; it is often felt in the deep-throated *ohms* of the nirvana seekers; many hope for it in the loneliness of their Facebook. It has been analyzed endlessly by psychiatrists in the *id* and at the moment it is being pinpointed by excited neuroscientists in a dopamine site in the *caudate nucleus*. Union is the endorphin rush granted us by Molière as his words are given voice and his characters made flesh by a living actor before an audience and all individuals involved merge together in the joyous blessedness of shared laughter.

*The healthier people always prefer Comedy to Tragedy ...
ah ... one is never tired of laughter.
One can tire of gambling, rich food, women, but of laughter, no.
Have you ever heard anyone say,
"We've been laughing for a week; I beg you, let us weep today."
... The gods never weep. Their portion is laughter.
... Blessedness consists of laughter.*

Molière to La Fontaine

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Molière in all plays

 Madeleine Béjart in *Les Précieuses Ridicules*

 Catherine de Brie in *L'École des Femmes*

 Armande in *Le Misanthrope*

Jacques Copeau, Louis Jouvet, Jean-Louis Barrault in *Les Fourberies de Scapin*

 Louis Jouvet and Dominique Blanchar in *L'École des Femmes*

 Ariane Mnouchkine versus Ron Leibman in *Tartuffe*

 Andrzej Seweryn and the Comédie-Française in *Don Juan*

 California Variations on *Don Juan* and *The Miser*

 Molière and Lully for Louis XIV, King of France

 Richard Wilbur and *The Learned Ladies*

 Jean-Baptiste Poquelin in *Le Malade Imaginaire*

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Act One

THE BACK STORY

I

“’ALLO, MOLIÈRE”

La Comédie-Française

My introduction to Molière came through an ecstatic experience as a member of an audience. Since it was the beginning of my long obsession with Jean-Baptiste Poquelin *dit* Molière, I share it as a springboard into my subject.¹

In the late forties I was in Paris on the GI Bill. By a great stroke of luck I had rented a room in Montmartre behind the Sacré Coeur. It was owned by an actress, Mademoiselle Nadine Marziano, a *pensionnaire* at the Comédie-Française,² who became my friend and mentor. She told me that a famous actor she greatly admired was making his return to the theater after his absence during the war. She, a Swiss citizen, had played in the repertory during the German occupation, while many French actors had left the public view for various personal and political reasons. Monsieur Aimé Clariond,³ who had left the company to work heroically in the World War II French underground Resistance, was returning that night for the first time to perform his pre-war role as Alceste in Molière’s *Le Misanthrope*, a role for which he had been highly acclaimed. I accepted her invitation to join her at the theater.

The square in front of the Comédie-Française was swarming with people; the lobby was packed; throngs crowded around *le contrôle* – a high counter that served as a VIP box office, behind which sat three black-suited officials presiding like minor Brechtian gods over everyone’s fate. Mlle Marziano managed, with much fervent discussion, to obtain two green slips that allowed us to enter the theater. I found myself sitting in the center aisle on a little *strapontin* – a fold-down seat attached to the permanent aisle seat in the first row where Mlle Marziano was installed. The place was buzzing with rapidly spoken French discussions and much moving about. Looking around, I saw the boxes surrounding the orchestra all overflowing with eager spectators awaiting the curtain’s rise on the stage of what is familiarly known as “The House of Molière.”

At that time I knew little of Molière and had hardly any real knowledge of either the theater or the language around me; yet I experienced an unusual heightened excitement of waiting for something very special to begin. I heard