



It's a Mean, Mean, Mean, Mean World

Molière's cynical classic *The Miser* rides the line between hilarity and tragedy

By Karen Campbell

"Christ on a bike!"

It's an absurdly profane invective, delivered by a character in fuchsia tights and lime-green boots carrying a bucket for a purse. But with that delirious pronouncement (and quite a few irreverent others, such as "Jesus on a whale!"), the matchmaker Frosine deliciously captures the tone of a vividly physical, attention-getting new co-production of Molière's *The Miser*. The project is a three-way collaboration of [American Repertory Theatre](#) of Cambridge, Mass. (where the production premiered in June), [Theatre de la Jeune Lune](#) of Minneapolis (where it reopens in November) and Kentucky's [Actors Theatre of Louisville](#), where it is currently on the boards through Oct. 16.

Directed by Jeune Lune founder and co-artistic director [Dominique Serrand](#), Molière's timeless comic tragedy of obsessive greed is ablaze with both scathing humor and searing insight into the human condition. The colorfully liberal, often scatological adaptation by dramatic theorist [David Ball](#), who has worked with Theatre de la Jeune Lune for 25 years, may not be the most literal, but the creators insist that it is faithful to Molière in flow, gesture and spirit, modernizing the play's ironic, cynical style without falling into cutesy contemporary references.

"Molière was always pushing the language, screwing around with syntax," asserts Jeune Lune co-director [Steven Epp](#), who plays the role of the miser Harpagon. "We had to find a way to get the equivalent of that in performance today, with the characters volatile and opinionated, but we didn't want contemporary references. We always went back to original French."

The bawdy effusiveness of the text feeds brilliantly into the production's dynamic physicality, which is Jeune Lune's hallmark. Founded in France in 1978 by graduates of the [Lecoq School of Physical Theatre Training](#) in Paris, the award-winning company (based in Minneapolis since 1985) is grounded in a wide palette of theatrical traditions—from commedia dell'arte to circus—that use movement as a primary element of expression and character development. As Epp explains, "We dissect the body in its movement, power and playfulness, and glean from that ways to apply that physicality to whatever material we're working with, to galvanize the role and find what's pertinent to a contemporary audience."

It is an approach Jeune Lune uses to give fresh energy to classics, which helps explain the company's fanciful name, taken from a poem by Bertolt Brecht ("As the people say, at the moon's change of phases / The new moon holds for one night long / The old moon in its arms"). The company's mission is to maintain theatrical power and relevance by "looking for the new in the old," creating a kind of theatre that is "immediate, high-spirited, passionately physical and visually spectacular."

Indeed, all those qualities were cast in sharp relief in the company's collaboration with their Massachusetts and Kentucky cohorts. Fueled by a vibrant cast of veteran talents from both the ART and Jeune Lune companies, the production is chock-full of comic invention, both physical and linguistic. The ART players include [Karen MacDonald](#) as Frosine, [Will LeBow](#) as Valere and [Remo Airaldi](#) as the chef/stable master. While LeBow plays the manservant as a rather reserved but charismatic straight man who feeds Harpagon what he wants to hear, MacDonald is a dynamo as the wily matchmaker. She nods her head and bounces on the balls of her feet with obsequious fervor in her attempts to win Harpagon's business, and their negotiations are peppered with a kind of florid sign language. She careens between postures of subservience and bravado, claiming, "I could marry the Virgin Mary to the Mayor of Gomorrah." She also has one of the best one-liners in the play: As she consoles Harpagon's reluctant young intended, Mariane, who is repulsed by her husband-to-be, Frosine counters, "That's why God gave us eyelids."

As the chef assigns the task of purchasing and preparing food for an upcoming party, a rotundly padded Airaldi nearly chokes trying to get out a request for money, knowing the wrath his master will unleash. He looks clenched, constipated with dread. He stutters. His fingers flutter around his mouth, as if trying to both disguise the immanent word and prevent its utterance at the same time.

As Harpagon's flighty, high-strung son Cleante, "the little pisser" who rebels against his father by frivolous expenditures and compulsive gambling, Jeune Lune's [Stephen Cartmell](#) effuses delightful, dandyish little twitches, pacing and ranting like a testosterone-charged teen. [Sarah Agnew](#)'s Elise is sweetly timid and a little ditzy. Cowed by her father's insistence on a loveless marriage to someone who will demand no dowry, she flinches and whimpers with the apprehensive demeanor of a cornered child. [Natalie Moore](#)'s slightly kooky Mariane hardly seems the inspiration for two men's blind affection, but there is a certain charm to her comically fractured English.

But, of course, the play is driven by the miser himself, and Epp, who has played major roles in nearly every Jeune Lune production since joining the company in 1983, gives a virtuosic portrayal of the notorious skinflint. It is a role Molière created for himself, purportedly bringing to it impeccable comic timing and the broad physicality of the Italian commedia. Epp, sporting the long unkempt hair and tattered dress of a derelict, plays the character's obsessive frugality as less venal than pathological. As he fluctuates between puerile petulance and wily malice, Epp juxtaposes the childlike waddle of the aged with an arrogant glide, pelvis thrust forward. Sometimes it slinks into a serpent-like slither, accompanied by a flick of the tongue.

Epp explains, "It's a kind of infantile quality that comes from being so self-absorbed, combined with paranoia that pushes him to the point where he goes in and out of a kind of dementia and extreme lucidity, depending on what's in the room and what's suspicious. It's as though his age shifts, so that when he's energized, he's quite young and agile; then, in a second, he's very easily exhausted or deluded. He loses sense of what's real and what's not."

Epp tapped into the immediacy of emotion and spontaneity he noticed while hanging out with a friend's three-year-old. "Watching him career around the room and go from tantrum to sheer joy in a couple of seconds, I wanted to access some of that, which you also see with senile old people."

There is a brilliant skit with a servant in which master and lackey both display the same body language—bodies slumped, shoulders slightly stooped, heads pitched forward. The servant, however, is clearly relaxed and resigned, while Harpagon is tightly coiled with paranoia and self-inflicted misery. He nearly chokes with apoplectic outrage. Yet, the moment he finds that his hidden stash is missing, he careens through the house like a pinball, bouncing off the walls in despair, accusing everyone in sight (even the audience) and eventually uttering his most telling line: "I will never trust anyone again—not even myself."

It's all in the tradition of commedia. As Epp explains, "Commedia characters always have a certain innocence and childlike quality—they open up to real vulnerability and emotions, and they can go into those places we want to see them go. That's what is entertaining and moving: You can

ride the line between being hilarious and tragic. It can be funnier and at the same time more vicious."

One of the best physical schticks in *The Miser* is also the most devastating. When Elise kicks her father's cane out from under him, the humor at Epp's crashing pratfall is tempered by the shock of Elise's transformation—her unmitigated fury and hatred. Another moment illustrates the culture of fear and revulsion Harpagon has fostered in his household: As he has his servants line up for duty call, they try to avert their eyes to avoid being singled out, while trying to pay just enough attention to be properly respectful toward their master. Serrand illumines this anxious dichotomy with a vivid silent symphony of head-ducking and eye-darting.

Though the action gets bogged down in the Act 2 confrontation between Harpagon and Cleante, the production is otherwise deftly infused with a visceral sense of energy and a number of effectively integrated sight gags. A door off its hinges is matter-of-factly moved aside as people come and go. Another door sports broken panes of glass, allowing for a silly arm-wrestling routine.

Riccardo Hernandez's scenic design cleverly evokes Harpagon's miserliness. The stateroom of his once-luxurious mansion is now in a state of dangerous disrepair, with dingy, cracked plaster and a floor that threatens to collapse by work's end. In one wall, there is a small slot through which Harpagon dispenses toilet paper to his guests, one stingy piece at a time. For Harpagon's bath, a servant mounts stilts to unleash rainwater from plastic sheets covering a gaping hole in the roof.

Ultimately, *The Miser* is about emptiness and loss. Though the play defies direct analogy, Serrand believes it is particularly resonant for our times, calling it a response to a kind of "social desperation" as social structures are eroded. "I thought it was a mean play, and these are mean times," he attests. "I think it is a time of great greed and lack of generosity, and those of us sensitive to the social climate are living terrified."

Serrand calls Harpagon "the perfect emblem of the times we live in," the ultimate paranoid conservative. "He has nothing to win except not sharing—that is his power. But at times, he is very human, hurt, touched, vulnerable. It's good to see that fragility. I wanted to make it possible for him to change. The only reason he doesn't is because he's decided not to."

The actor adds, "You can't help but see something of the cruelty of the world that we're living in right now in this little microcosm—how, because of this person's narrow-minded, greed-driven paranoia, everyone in that immediate world is infected, lying and cheating. They're forced into that dishonesty by the world they live in. What's brilliant about Molière is that we laugh at it, though if you think about it, it's pretty damn awful. There's something very pertinent about that."

Serrand took guidance from Molière's state of mind at the time he wrote the play—he was bitter and angry, having just had *Tartuffe* and *Don Juan* censored. Serrand believes the play's scathing comedy arises directly from the human condition. "I was always trying to remind the actors that they must come from a very human place, not just deliver a little number. Slapstick is a healthy sign that we are still alive and have a sense of humor about ourselves, but I use it only when necessary. We laugh when we recognize humanity."

It was during the rehearsal process that Serrand came to a revelation. "I realized this was *not* a comedy," he says. "Once we got there, we all realized how beautiful or ugly it could be, but we had to get to the meat of it, to dance it and sing it to get to the depths of it." To do that, Serrand elicited input from all the actors. "It takes all the people in the room," he maintains. "It's about ensemble, always." In fact, one of the most enduring aspects of the production may be the artistic synergy and creative exchange of the collaboration itself. Working with ART, he says, has been "fantastic, one of the best relationships we've ever had. It's a rare place in terms of American institutions, so supportive of the work, taking risks, allowing artists to pursue what they want to attempt, but not trying to interfere or narrow the goals."

ART executive director **Robert Orchard** also believes the collaboration with Jeune Lune was a particularly good fit, given both groups' progressive bent and shared values. Next year, a team from the Minneapolis company has been invited back to Cambridge to collaborate on a new adaptation of Kafka's *Amerika*. Orchard believes Jeune Lune's distinctive movement vocabulary enriched the ART actors' palette of skills—and they, in turn, undoubtedly influenced the Jeune Lune actors as well.

"The important part," Orchard maintains, "is that the experience was an embracing and deeply mutually respectful one." Could be the start of a beautiful friendship.

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