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God of Laughter

An Epic Drama Rife with Humor
on the Life and Times of Moliere

by Gordon C. Bennett

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God of Laughter

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SETTING

Set in Paris, story evolves over 15 years in 17th Century France with the primary action taking place in the home of Moliere and his troupe on the Rue de Richelieu.

CHARACTERS

4W / 7M

(Less with doubling)

MOLIERE; (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin): *The legendary 17th Century French comic playwright (1622-73): bold, talented, loyal to his friends, but sometimes preoccupied, moody and dispirited...A complex, many-faceted artist with a bent for satire...and not particularly handsome. Moliere is 36 at the top of the play.*

MADELEINE BEJART: *40, a member of the Illustrious Theatre's founding family and its business manager. Moliere's friend and former lover, she is a self-assured, handsome, warm, and sensitive woman.*

ARMANDE BEJART: *Madeleine's young sister, 19 years younger than Moliere. She is clever and beautiful, yet extravagant and flirtatious. Her marriage to Moliere is not "made in heaven," but her loyalty to him is, towards the end, surprising.*

CHARLES VARLET DE LA GRANGE: *A clever actor with a resonant voice and good comedic skills. He also becomes the bookkeeper for the troupe and its orateur, or promoter. These roles facilitate his connection to the audience as he provides critical exposition and creates an emotional bond with theatre patrons.*

THERESA DU PARC: *Calls herself "Marquise;" A skilled dancer and actress, she is vain, ambitious, and temperamental.*

NICOLAS BOILEAU: *A poet and satirist of the time, well known in Paris social circles. He is Moliere's boon companion and highly esteemed by the entire company.*

LA FORET: *Moliere's housekeeper, of indeterminate age. She possesses a biting wit and a tendency to intrude in Moliere's affairs, even to critiquing his work. Her resemblance to Dorine in "Tartuffe" and other saucy servants in Moliere's comedies is not accidental.*

MONTFLEURY: *A leading actor with the rival troupe at the Hotel de Bourgogne, is pompous, a supercilious dandy, in fact—an excellent foil for the comic pranks of Moliere's company.*

CHARACTERS, Continued

MICHEL BARON: *A rather shy young man and formerly an actor in a children's troupe. He is Moliere's special protégé and a not-so-secret admirer of Armande.*

KING LOUIS XIV: *The "Sun King," is vain, arrogant, and a womanizer; a strong patron of the arts early in life, and a staunch supporter of Moliere. With age, he more and more falls under the influence of the Jansenists and other puritanical types in the Church.*

A PRIEST: *Appears in only one scene. This role can be doubled with that of Nicolas Boileau, or another character, leaving a cast of 10.*

ETC

The initial performance of this play was staged at Eastern University, St. Davids, PA., with Mark Hallen as artistic director and with a stellar undergraduate cast. Several years later, *God of Laughter* won the CITA Award for best full-length play in its national competition.

Original (instrumental) music for the show was composed and copyright © by Drew Placzek with the use of a synthesizer, and is available on CD*. Placzek's music was used for transitions and to highlight certain action. Contact playsnow@heartlandplays.com for information on obtaining the music. Author's production suggestions will appear at the end of the script.

*Note: It may be the director's preference to build a sound track using Lully and other Baroque music from Moliere's time.

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ACT I; PROLOGUE

“REQUIEM”

AT RISE: We hear a brief excerpt of **BAROQUE MUSIC**. The stage lights remain down as the music fades into the pre-recorded voices of the characters portraying characters from Moliere’s “The Imaginary Invalid” which is later played as “a play within” at the end of Act II. Although the play may simply begin with lights up on Scene I, the Prologue foreshadows the play’s conclusion and so everything that follows becomes, in effect, the story-as-remembered by Moliere’s fellow actors and admirers.

LA GRANGE, *VOICE ONLY*

(As *BARALDE*) Monsieur Argan, are you prepared to become a physician, the most revered of all professions?

MOLIERE, *VOICE ONLY*

(As *ARGAN*, his voice strained) Yes... Yes!

LA GRANGE, *VOICE ONLY*

Then, upon your declaration of intent, we grant you membership in the medical fraternity, with all the rights and privileges appertaining thereto.

MOLIERE, *VOICE ONLY*

Yes... Yes, I must—finish—

LA GRANGE, *VOICE ONLY*

Monsieur Argan, do you swear to it?

MOLIERE, *VOICE ONLY*

(*Coughs badly*) Yes, yes! I swear it! Juro!

A choking sound followed by a woman's cry "Jean!" in response to MOLIERE who will have collapsed on stage. BARON is heard speaking to the audience.

BARON, VOICE ONLY

(Awkwardly) Ladies and gentlemen, I beg your indulgence. Please—withhold your applause—thank you. I—I'm sorry. It seems—it seems that Monsieur has taken ill. He cannot continue. But—the play is complete as it stands.

SOFT, HAUNTING MUSIC, perhaps a single violin. LIGHTS UP dimly revealing a bare stage except for Moliere's chair, which will also appear later in the play. Individually ARMANDE, LA FORET, BARON, and BOILEAU approach the chair reverently, each holding a lighted candle as if the Master's Disciples are gathering for a last look and to share their common memories. ARMANDE gently strokes the top of the chair's back as the OTHERS look on in silence, lost in recollection. Then, suddenly BARON hiccoughs, then stifles another. A silent beat follows and then LA FORET hiccoughs once, then again. Another beat. The OTHERS begin to chuckle. THEY laugh, each one differently, but despite themselves, THEY break up and the entire tone changes.

ACT I; SCENE ONE

AT RISE: Now we hear giggles and guffaws from offstage. LIGHTS UP halfway. A bed or divan is pushed onto center stage. MOLIERE and MADELEINE kneel on it or pose in some fashion facing one another. THEY freeze as the lights dim center. A SOFT SPOT now rises on LA GRANGE who is holding a large account book and addressing the Audience.

LA GRANGE

Ah...22 livres...15...10...47 livres. We shall not last long in Paris at this rate. Oh...
(*Noticing Audience*)...My name is Charles Varlet de la Grange, and aside from taking a few
parts I am the keeper of the ledger. Bookkeeper. And with the state of our finances, in order to
balance our accounts I have to resort to some kind of (*With a wink*) legerdemain! It is the year
of our Lord 1658, and the Illustrious Theatre, as it was wistfully named, has been invited to
perform in the Great Hall at the Louvre in Paris before King Louis XIV, other distinguished
persona, and members of our rival troupe, the Hotel de Bourgogne. We nervously await a
decision by our illustrious leaders, Madeleine Bejart and Jean-Baptiste Poquelin—Moliere!
What script to perform?

SPOT OUT on LA GRANGE.

*MOLIERE and MADELEINE spring to
life. THEY work playfully on and around
the divan.*

MOLIERE

(*Leaping from the bed/divan*) Tragedy!

MADELEINE

Comedy!

MOLIERE

Tragedy!

MADELEINE

No, Jean! Comedy!

MOLIERE

Tragedy, Madeleine! (*Posing as the gallant Don Rodrigue from “Le Cid”*) I stand, my heart
confused and torn, my soul afire!

MADELEINE

Comedy, Jean! (*Posing as Martine, the nagging Country Wife in “The Doctor in Spite of
Himself”, using a country accent*) Dear husband, is it true you’re going to be hanged?

MOLIERE

(*Adopting a declamatory manner*) Where shall I turn? My love is mocked, whichever way I
move. If I avenge my father I destroy my love!

MADELEINE

Must you die with all these people around? I wouldn’t mind so much if you had finished
cutting the wood!

MOLIERE

(Dropping character) Madeleine, must you parrot my lines from those trivial farces we invented to amuse the peasants? We're in Paris, and it takes more than slapstick and contrived lazzi to win an urbane audience—including the Sun King himself!

MADELEINE

But the tragedians of the Hotel de Bourgogne read the same lines with more grace, more dignity—

MOLIERE

Nonsense!

MADELEINE

—such style, such grand eloquence. We cannot match them—

MOLIERE

But the King expects a tragic play!

MADELEINE

Louis XIV has been known to chuckle at a funeral. Please him with a farce!

MOLIERE

I'm not a simple clown.

MADELEINE

No. *(Beat)* You're not at all simple, my clown. *(Kisses him)* But Jean, don't you see? We have to impress with what we do best. Does a cabinetmaker stitch a vest? Does a portrait painter build cabinets? Our forte—your genius, love, is comedy. Farce. Amusement. A copper coin for a lungful of laughs. Why tragedy?

MOLIERE

It is a higher form of art. It soars. It sears men's souls.

MADELEINE

Sears men's....souls? *(Dismissal gesture)*

MOLIERE

(Stubbornly) I want to play "Le Cid", Corneille's new work.

MADELEINE

(Beat) Jean, come here. *(THEY draw closer)* ...Look into my eyes; they'll be a mirror to your face. What do you see?

MOLIERE

It is Don Roderigue in "Le Cid". Where shall I turn? My love is mocked, whichever way I move—

MADELEINE

No, Jean! Look again. (*Taking his head, making him stare into her eyes*) What do you see? It's not the face of a tragic hero—Oedipus, Creon, Don Roderigue.

MOLIERE

(*Chuckles*) If we're talking about faces—

MADELEINE

That face you see reflected in my eyes—that face has launched a thousand laughs during our thirteen-year odyssey through the provinces.

MOLIERE

Must you paraphrase Homer? If we're talking about faces—

MADELEINE

I know, cheri. Mine is the poodle's face, petite and whimsical with a pasted-on nose. I heard all about it that chilly night in Lyon when we rubbed shoulders in the hay. And under that stage in Lyon, sharing our space—with a duck.

MOLIERE

I got down up my nose.

MADELEINE

I got down under your nose. When you were through sneezing, we made love. (*THEY kiss*) They were not such bad days.

MOLIERE

No? Rude spectators, raw country bumpkins who didn't know that to clap you have to slap one hand against the other. And the ugly insults—

MADELEINE

We got used to them.

MOLIERE

Often some pompous parish priest refused us a performance license.

MADELEINE

Teaching us fortitude.

MOLIERE

Especially during Lent.

MADELEINE

We learned the virtues of fasting—

MOLIERE

Or starving! Always begging this or that noble for patronage.

MADELEINE

That taught us patience, and how to live by our wits.

MOLIERE

Must you remember the lessons?

MADELEINE

Are you forgetting them?

MOLIERE

Education bores me. Perhaps I am a simpleton, after all.

MADELEINE

You are the most complex man I know, and the most adorable. Now don't be obstinate. City folk need amusement too. Comedy, of course. The President of Paris loves a good belly-laugh.

MOLIERE

But there is still the King, who expects a tragic play!

MADELEINE

Then let's compromise, Jean. (*Beat*) First we'll play a revenge tragedy. Judge the reactions, m'lord! If they don't like it, or the royal face frowns when curtain falls, we'll play a farce—"The Love-Sick Doctor"!

There is a long pause as MOLIERE considers.

MOLIERE

Agreed. But...

MADELEINE

No buts, Jean! Please...trust me.

MOLIERE

Oh, Madeleine—it's always "trust me, Jean!" But I must admit (*Giving her a hug*) you're very trustworthy. Oh, Madeleine, my dear one, my heart-throb...how I adore you. Dare I propose?

MADELEINE

Again, Jean?

MOLIERE

Once a month, at least, the day after the rent is paid.

MADELEINE

Dear Jean...there are marriageable women and unmarriageable ones. I am incorrigibly unmarriageable.

MOLIERE

You are incorrigibly unmanageable! But my love, my darling—as to tragedy—

MADELAINE

No buts, cheri! You will see that I am right.

MOLIERE

There is one fault in you, Madeleine. You are always right.

*THEY sink into the bed/divan as LIGHTS
FADE OUT.*

ACT I; SCENE TWO

AT RISE: A ROYAL FANFARE follows. HOUSE LIGHTS RISE to half as KING LOUIS followed by MONTFLEURY – and a PAGE if desired – proudly stride down an aisle through the audience and take a prominent seat on a platform just below stage level. Meanwhile on stage, the bed/divan has been struck. KING LOUIS and MONTFLEURY face the stage in silhouette. OPERATIC MUSIC underscores a series of tragic events performed by THE COMPANY in mime; Extreme pathos and stylized action including several stabbings and over dramatic deaths. The effect is humorous although not so intended, carefully choreographed to demonstrate their failure to play tragedy well. At close, THE COMPANY takes a bow before KING LOUIS and MONTFLEURY who applaud perfunctorily, without enthusiasm. THE COMPANY exits. Then, with barely disguised anxiety, MOLIERE approaches the KING.

MOLIERE

Your royal highness, ladies and gentlemen. We had thought to please this distinguished company with a tragedy by the worthy Corneille. But it was a mistake to assume that we could match the brilliance of the troupe de Bourgogne, which has delighted Paris with its performances for so many years. (*Pausing to gather his wits*)... However, if your majesty pleases...we should like to perform a brief afterpiece. It is but a rustic farce with which we have amused many in the provinces. We trust you too will find it—ah—amusing.

MOLIERE waits nervously for some sign from KING LOUIS. THE KING glances at MONTFLEURY then shrugs, nodding to MOLIERE. MOLIERE bows and crosses upstage as lights shift to another short dumb-show. Lighter, comic music underscores as, THE COMPANY performs several brief farcical mimes punctuated with slapstick business or a series of quick poses with blackouts similar to stop-action photography. At close, THE COMPANY bows to THE KING. After a moment, KING LOUIS begins to chuckle, then laughs loudly, applauding as he does so whereupon MONTFLEURY also begins applauding and, perhaps, additional applause is heard from the wings. THE COMPANY disappears leaving MOLIERE rooted upstage. The house lights fade out as LOUIS and MONTFLEURY slowly rise and ascend the steps to the stage.

KING LOUIS

Now then, Monsieur Montfleury. Is this a troupe to be reckoned with?

MONTFLEURY

I think not, sire. Their staging is juvenile compared to ours. Their tragic timing is terrible, and when they deliver lines to a prince they sound as if meant for a parlor maid.

KING LOUIS

The tragedy was flat, but they have a knack for farce.

MONTFLEURY

(*Conceding reluctantly*) They were somewhat—droll.

KING LOUIS

Yes, they know their business well.

MONTFLEURY

They know how to make fools of themselves.

KING LOUIS

(Glancing upstage) Excuse me. Moliere!... *(Then to MONTFLEURY)* I must speak to the man.

MONTFLEURY

Your servant, my liege.

MONTFLEURY bows and exits.

KING LOUIS

(To MOLIERE who approaches hesitantly) Monsieur, my congratulations. *(MOLIERE begins to kneel)* No, on your feet.

MOLIERE

(Bowing) Your Majesty.

KING LOUIS

I was quite amused by your little fantasy—or farce—whatever. Your ladies are lovely and your comic foil, La Grange, was excellent. And you wrote the play yourself? *(MOLIERE nods.)* Splendid! You should make notes for some other characters when you attend me at Versailles. My court is full of boors and bores beyond description—not to mention hypocrites.

MOLIERE

Majesty?

KING LOUIS

And the hoity-toity exquisites, with their sartorial splendor and affectations—they drive me to distraction with their rhyming lines! You would have a cast of characters inventing themselves!

MOILERE

That does sound like a playwright's paradise!

KING LOUIS

Mai oui. But you need a Paris playhouse. Hmm...You shall have the Theatre de Petit Bourbon. Share it with the Italians. Work out an arrangement. Well?

MOLIERE

I am elated, sire! Overwhelmed! May you live forever!

KING LOUIS

That is my hope. They bleed me once a month to keep me healthy. How does your physician care for you?

MOLIERE

He prescribes things when I am ill, majesty. And when I ignore them I recover.

KING LOUIS

(Chuckles) That is a fine exit line, Monsieur. Good day to you.

KING LOUIS turns and exits. MOLIERE bows and exits opposite. BLACKOUT.

ACT I; SCENE THREE

AT RISE: PERIOD DANCE MUSIC, a minuet perhaps, underscores the transition to Moliere's sitting-room. LIGHTS RISE on DU PARC dancing center. MADELEINE, BOILEAU, BARON, LA FORET and MOLIERE appear, joining in the celebration. LA FORET keeps their goblets supplied with wine as DU PARC continues to dance around the circle flirting with one or another gentleman, snubbing LA FORET, then finishing with a flourish. SHE goes to MOLIERE and curtsies extravagantly before him. The OTHERS applaud and offer compliments as the MUSIC ends.

BOILEAU

Excellent! Everyone! A toast to the new God of Laughter!

ALL

The God of Laughter!

MOLIERE

Wait! That has an evil sound to it! The phrase is irreverent, Nicolas.

BOILEAU

Oh, I disclaim authorship. Would I stoop to such a metaphor? *(OTHERS ad lib in response.)* It's actually the title of a poem that's been making the rounds of the salons these days, ever since your success with "The Pretentious Young Ladies".

MOLIERE

Ah...my success. The exquisites called it something else!

MADELEINE

I think it is a fine tribute. Providing comedy to divert people from the tedium and torments of their everyday lives—it is a noble thing—

BOILEAU

But Jean is embarrassed. Another toast... To Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, kissed by fate, the new— Prince of Theatre!

MOLIERE

(Aside, to one of the guests) I was a frog once.

BOILEAU

May he write profusely! To Moliere!— A talent like wine, that matures with age.

MOLIERE

Unless it turns to vinegar first!

*ALL ad lib in response and drink to
MOLIERE.*

MOLIERE, *Continues*

Friends, I have a toast to make as well. Nicolas, please— *(BOILEAU produces a bouquet and hands it to MOLIERE who presents it to MADELEINE.)* To you, dear Madeleine... My Muse, my friend, and as one of the founding family of the Illustrious Theatre, our manager and leading lady—

LA GRANGE

Our Queen!

MOLIERE

Friends, raise your glasses to Madeleine and the Bejart family!

*ALL toast then break into private
conversations. MOLIERE introduces DU
PARC to BOILEAU.*

MOLIERE, *Continues*

Nicolas Boileau, my dear friend and poet laureate of Paris... May I present the lovely and gifted Mademoiselle Du Parc?

BOILEAU

Charmed, my dear. Are you single?

DU PARC

No.

BOILEAU

Ah, the pretty ones are always married. Happily?

DU PARC

Monsieur!

BOILEAU

Your dancing has great spirit to it. Jean, this young lady is the finest addition you've made since becoming established in Paris.

MOLIERE

Mademoiselle will star in the comedy-ballets that his majesty has commissioned for Versailles.

BOILEAU

Hmm. Will you excuse us, mademoiselle?

Takes MOLIERE aside— DU PARC joins another conversation.

BOILEAU

Jean, dear friend, I hope you're not going to waste your talent writing those silly court pageants for Versailles! They're full of—nothing!

MOLIERE

Nicolas, calm yourself. I still intend to write tragedy.

BOILEAU

Still? But Jean...

BOILEAU takes MOLIERE upstage as DU PARC engages LA GRANGE.

DU PARC

This Boileau...is he anybody—important?

LA GRANGE

Only the most sophisticated poet and satirist in the city.

DU PARC

(Smugly) You don't say.

MADELEINE

(Re-directing her attention) Here's our young protégé, Mademoiselle. May I introduce Moliere's new pupil, Michel Baron? He's been a standout in one of the children's companies and we're going to develop him into a fine classical actor.

BARON

(Young and awkward) Mademoiselle. *(Kissing her hand)* Your dances were divinely...danced.

DU PARC

(Icily) Yes, lovely.

DU PARC turns away to join another conversation as the focus returns to BOILEAU and MOLIERE.

BOILEAU

Jean, there is a brilliant comedic actor standing on the threshold of fame. But a tragic playwright is holding the door shut.

MOLIERE

The simple clown again! You and Madeleine!

BOILEAU

Not simple, Jean. Tragic heroes are simple. They have but one goal: revenge. The end result: the grave. It's all so tame! But clowns—clowns are unpredictable. Unpretentious and unpredictable. And they come in all shapes and sizes.

LA FORET, Moliere's housekeeper, enters carrying a tray of goblets. SHE begins to serve the assembly. MOLIERE takes a glass as SHE passes.

MOLIERE

Thank you, La Foret. Keep everyone supplied.

LA FORET

(Sharply) I think I know my duties!

DU PARC

(Crossing to MOLIERE) A word with Monsieur Moliere... *(To BOILEAU)* ...if the gentleman doesn't mind.

BOILEAU

No indeed, mademoiselle.

BOILEAU bows, turns, and joins the group upstage.

MOLIERE

Ah, Theresa...

DU PARC

I am called Marquise now.

MOLIERE

Stage names! The ones used by our competitors are unusually flowery. Montfleury and Company!

DU PARC

You have a stage name too.

MOLIERE

Yes, but it means nothing. I chose it for the sound.

DU PARC

I think it's enchanting. Very much like—its owner.

THEY continue quietly as the conversation upstage dominates.

MADELEINE

What is she up to?

LA GRANGE

Fear not, my dear. She's married.

BOILEAU

That won't stop her. I've seen her work the salons, trying to make contacts.

MADELEINE

Contacts, Nicolas?

BOILEAU

Nothing to worry about. She's looking for roles, not romance.

The focus returns to MOLIERE and DU PARC.

DU PARC

You're an intriguing man, monsieur, as well as being handsome.

MOLIERE

I have never been called handsome, Marquise.

DU PARC

With our combined talent and good looks we should play opposite each other.

MOLIERE

Hmm. (*Turns away thoughtfully*) There is comic potential in...Hmm. Is there a story in the notion of a homely fellow being persuaded by his friends that he's handsome? He might let his heart get him into all sorts of embarrassing positions!

DU PARC

You're twisting my words, monsieur, and my heart. I meant everything sincerely.

MOLIERE

Of course, mademoiselle. But excuse me, I must address the company. La Foret, make sure everyone's well fortified!

LA FORET mugs, "I think I know my duties!" and fills several goblets as MOLIERE crosses upstage.

MOLIERE, *Continues*

Good friends! Raise your glasses and make your toasts. Life is short, time flies, and I must soon roll up my sleeves and apply pen to parchment.

BOILEAU

Shame, shame! Such clichés! Am I right, dear Madeleine?

MADELEINE

Indeed!

BOILEAU

Were those words actually spoken by the celebrated author of "The Pretentious Young Ladies", La Grange?

LA GRANGE

I wouldn't have expected such drivel from the master's mouth, monsieur.

BOILEAU

Speaking of nonsense...I met one of these ladies you skewered in your play and she was still trying to rhyme everything!

MADELEINE

Ah...The seriously delirious weary us.

BOILEAU

No, everything was in rhymed couplets. I thought I was in one of Jean's comedies.

LA GRANGE

Aha! That woman has no savoir faire...and yet I like her golden hair.

BOILEAU

Ah, Charles—that's why you're the actor and Jean's the playwright!

There is general laughter throughout.

MADELEINE

What have you been up to, Nicolas? Court satirist or man-about-town?

BOILEAU

Man-about-town mostly, chasing the ladies about town.

MADELEINE

Well... I hear you've been impressing society with your excellent impressions.

BOILEAU

Oh, I don't know—

MADELEINE

They're highly regarded. Please do an impression for us!

OTHERS ad lib in agreement.

BOILEAU

Well, if you all insist... There is a Florentine musician at court, a Monsieur Lully. (*Pronounced "LOO-LEE"*) In fact, his name is also Jean-Baptiste. (*MOLIERE grunts.*) Such a fawning social climber! This fellow Lully is the cat's meow, Italian style. Or so he fancies himself. (*Continuing with a mock-Italian accent*) Pleas-a to permit-a your magestee, these-a leetle fanfare for the royal hunt-a. (*Miming a horn-player*) Da-da-ta-ta-ta-da! And off goes his majesty after the foxes, saluted by seventeen cornets. And Monsieur Lully has composed music for all sorts of festive occasions—for the king's rising and the king's bedding - Ha-ha! - and for his royal supper and his royal signature on the royal document.... (*Miming again, OTHERS join in.*) Da-da-ta-ta-ta—da! And there is the fanfare for the royal sneeze— (HE holds his sleeve up to someone's nose who sneezes.) And for the royal burp (*ANOTHER burps*) and the royal belch (*ANOTHER belches*) —of course, heavy on the kettledrums! (*THEY laugh loudly*) Oh yes, there is even music for the royal commode. (*OTHERS join in again*) Da-da-ta-ta-ta— da! This is Monsieur Lully's supreme effort, his musical masterpiece— A tune to empty one's bowels by! And if the first one turns out poorly, we have only to await the second movement! (*The GROUP guffaws, except for DU PARC*) Ladies, pardon me if I have been too coarse.

MOLIERE

Oh, by the way, Nicolas. (*With a smirk*) Did I tell you that Monsieur Lully, whom you've ridiculed...is my partner?

BOILEAU

(*Deeply embarrassed now*) Oh, no!

MOLIERE

Yes, we're going to collaborate. He is to write the music for my comedy-ballets.

BOILEAU

Egad! What have I done! What have I said?

MOLIERE

Don't be too upset—

BOILEAU

What is it you thespians say—I'm dying out here!

Clutching his throat, BOILEAU sinks to the floor.

MOLIERE

Monsieur Lully is only a business partner.

BOILEAU

(Histrionically) My kingdom for a hearse!

OTHERS join in a round of laughs at BOILEAU's expense as LIGHTS FADE OUT.

ACT I; SCENE FOUR

AT RISE: MUSICAL BRIDGE. LIGHTS UP on MOLIERE in his chamber early morning. MOLIERE works at his desk as LA FORET enters with a tea tray.

LA FORET

Your morning tea, monsieur.

MOLIERE

(Writing, preoccupied) Thank you... Did you sleep well, La Foret?

LA FORET

Monsieur knows that I never sleep any better than a screech owl.

MOLIERE

(Barely looking up) And you sound like one too, this time of day.

LA FORET

There is the infernal noise of the great dramatist, scratching his pen on parchment, to say nothing of the thump-thump of his pacing about, from dusk to dawn, all night long!

MOLIERE

I often walk about, trying to birth an idea.

LA FORET

Also I have the backache, together with chills and fever. And my poor eyesight—

MOLIERE

My word, La Foret. You're a regular medical dictionary. They'd love to experiment with you at the Paris School of Medicine. Leeches, bleeding, purging...

LA FORET

Heaven forbid!

MOLIERE

A little joke, La Foret. Also, I'm exhausted, and there is yet a page or two in my head. And I've called an early rehearsal without the scene completely done.

LA FORET

You should sleep more.

MOLIERE

But when the ideas are running like horses you have to harness them or lose them. Hmm...Listen to this line from "School for Wives" and tell me what you think... (*Reading from his manuscript*) "Since happiness consists of finding a very faithful wife, your best course is to lead a bachelor's life!"

LA FORET

Oh, then to be happy he should remain single.

MOLIERE

Exactly.

LA FORET

(*Snatching his page from him*) You call that poetry?

MOLIERE

As a critic, La Foret—

LA FORET

But your meter, master! I'm astonished! Look here, we can improve on this... (*SHE walks about considering it*) Hmm. Try it this way: "Since seldom do men find a faithful wife, the wiser ones will lead a bachelor's life." Now, isn't that more rhythmic and harmonious?

MOLIERE

I don't think so, you busybody! Hmm... *(Taking up his pen)* What was that again?

LA FORET

"Since seldom do men find...."

MOLIERE

La Foret! *(Beat)* Where did you learn to read and write?

LA FORET

Didn't I mention that I was once in service to the Duke D'Avignon?

MOLIERE

Oh...So?

LA FORET

Very enlightened, he was. The Duke made sure that all the females in his house were literate. I struck a deal—I would take half pay for a year provided his 15-year-old son would teach me to read and write.

MOLIERE

I must say, you're full of surprises. *(Rising)* But I must be off! I have to assemble the cast, breakfast or no. Let me have my jacket.

LA FORET

(Helping him into his jacket) You really should have some breakfast.

MOLIERE

Later, La Foret. *(Exits)*

LA FORET

(Calling after him) Later it will be lunch! *(LA FORET picks up the manuscript again. There a knock at the door. MADELEINE enters. SHE has with her an attractive young woman who looks about curiously as THEY enter.)* Oh. Bonjour, Mademoiselle Bejart.

MADELEINE

Good morning, La Foret. This is my sister, Armande Bejart.

LA FORET

My pleasure indeed, mademoiselle. Monsieur Moliere's gone knocking on doors again.

MADELEINE

That man! He worries so. We'll wait, La Foret. *(LA FORET curtsies then exits. Noticing that ARMANDE appears apprehensive, MADELEINE smiles reassuringly.)* This is his chamber, where he does his writing.

ARMANDE

I shouldn't have come here.

MADELEINE

Nonsense. It's time you met the man who's been helping with the cost of your education.

ARMANDE

But, sister, I'm—terrified!

MADELEINE

But why?

ARMANDE

I have never met Monsieur Moliere. I'm afraid I shall tremble when he speaks to me.

MADELEINE

Don't be silly.

ARMANDE

Do I look all right? (*Feeling her shoulder*) I think I have a hump on my right shoulder.

MADELEINE

Humps are in style these days. It's the dromedary look, and quite in vogue since they brought his majesty a camel from Egypt.

ARMANDE

Don't laugh at me! I really want him to like me and I'm so afraid he won't.

MADELEINE

He's just a man, Armande.

ARMANDE

You don't get to talk to men in the convent.

Without warning, MOLIERE enters, stops dead at his first sight of ARMANDE. HE finds her stunning.

MOLIERE

(*Vacantly*) They had to wake La Grange.

MADELEINE

(*Kissing him on the cheek*) Morning, my love. This is my sister, Armande. Armande, this is the famous dramatist, Moliere.

MOLIERE

(*Entranced*) I remember you from...years ago. But you were...shorter.

MADELEINE

Girls grow up.

MOLIERE

And...thinner.

MADELEINE

They become women.

MOLIERE

(Gathering his wits) I am enchanted, mademoiselle.

MOLIERE kisses ARMANDE's hand. SHE responds nervously, spilling her words rapidly.

ARMANDE

They—they taught us a few things, monsieur...in the convent. To fear God, as they say, and to eschew loose living. But often we had some excitement when—when a wealthy woman, a duchess or something, came to the convent for a retreat--or to mend her ways. She would tell us what was happening outside. And sometimes someone would smuggle in a romance and we girls would read it until the pages were dirty and falling apart. The convent was not always so—so very dull but—but mostly—mostly it was...*(Beat)* Oh dear, I fear that I'm talking too much, Madeleine, and I thought I wouldn't be able to talk at all!

MOLIERE

They had no rule of silence at your nunnery?

ARMANDE

Oh no, I should have died!

Finding her quite charming, MOLIERE smiles. There is an awkward pause. MADELEINE uneasily breaks the silence.

MADELEINE

What do you think, Jean? Doesn't she look and speak well? Remember, we spoke of her as an actress.

MOLIERE

Yes. We must have a talk, Armande.

ARMANDE

I am ready to be taught.

MOLIERE

Ah...First there are some things you must know about our profession.

HE notices that MADELEINE is holding her head, as if in pain.

MOLIERE, *Continues*

Are you well, Madeleine?

MADELEINE

My head is throbbing today. I shall ask La Foret for some tea.

MOLIERE

Have you a fever? You've been looking pale.

MADELEINE

I think I'll rest awhile.

MOLIERE

Please do. (*MADELEINE exits.*) Will you be seated, Armande? (*ARMANDE takes a chair and eagerly awaits his next words.*) Acting is a noble, venerable profession. It is also very public. You will be cheered and jeered as well, and you may have to dodge baked apples. There will be imbeciles who think you are the same person on the street as you were on stage, and they will treat you as Agnes, or Georgette, not as Armande. You will be panned by critics who want to make a name at your expense. And, at the end, the Church will call you a profligate and refuse to bury you, unless you recant and deny your profession. Do you understand me?

ARMANDE

All but the baked apples.

MOLIERE

(*Chuckles*) They sell them in the theatre and people throw them at us if they don't like the play.

ARMANDE

I am a clever dodger.

MOLIERE

Have you seen many plays?

ARMANDE

I have seen two of yours since coming to Paris, "Pretentious Young Ladies" and "School for Husbands". (*Beat*) Do you care what they say about your plays?

MOLIERE

Not as long as they buy tickets.

ARMANDE

Really?

MOLIERE

No, I lied, Armande. I do care. Especially when the critics say it is not good art or that it contradicts Aristotle's rules.

ARMANDE

I don't care about rules! When I see a play I will ask only if it is true, and whether it touches me, and if it does I will not care whether Aristotle's silly rules prevent me from clapping!

MOLIERE

Well spoken! You are not only very attractive, but very sensible.

ARMANDE

(Intensely) What if a person tasted a delicious sauce and dismissed it because it wasn't made according to any recipe in La Varenne's famous cookbook?

MOLIERE

My dear, you don't have to convince me!

ARMANDE

(Picking up his manuscript) Is this your new play? *(HE nods.)* "School for Wives"... How do you manage to be so funny?

MOLIERE

I start with the laugh, and work backwards.

ARMANDE laughs, and for the first time seems at ease with MOLIERE. There is a knock on the door and DU PARC and LA GRANGE enter. MOLIERE greets them.

DU PARC

Monsieur?

MOLIERE

Good morning, mademoiselle...Charles. This is Madeleine's sister, Armande. She will audition for us today.

ARMANDE

(Taken aback) Today? But I—I thought—

LA GRANGE

(Kissing her hand) La Grange here. Delighted, my dear.

DU PARC

I am the Marquise. Welcome to Paris. Madeleine's spoken well of you.

ARMANDE

Thank you. But should I be auditioning already?

MOLIERE

Don't fret, Armande. You do want to become an actress?

ARMANDE

Yes, of course. However—

MOLIERE

There is no time like now! Friends, Madeleine is indisposed, but our present business doesn't concern her. We need to cast our new play and the only role that's undetermined is that of Agnes. The Marquise is a possibility, and so is Armande.

LA GRANGE

Armande?

DU PARC

(Outraged) You don't mean it monsieur! Are you seriously considering casting this child, with no acting experience, in the role?

MOLIERE

It is by no means settled, Marquise. I want to hear both of you.

DU PARC

I'd consider it beneath me to read against this child, monsieur.

ARMANDE

I have played a few small roles, mademoiselle, in the nunnery.

DU PARC

Nunnery! You might as well have played in a nursery! Is your convent experience going to qualify you for the Paris stage? Mon dieu! Moliere, sometimes I think you have lost your head!

MOLIERE

Then help me reattach it. Come now, we're wasting time.

LA GRANGE

You may as well trust his instincts, Teresa. He's generally right.

DU PARC

This is none of your business, Charles! *(Crosses the room angrily, and then stops.)* Oh, very well... What is the scene?

MOLIERE

Charles, you'll read Arnolphe, and you read Agnes, Marquise. Now Agnes is a very demure young person, apparently devoted to her patron, Arnolphe. Arnolphe has returned home after an absence, and he's alarmed about his ward—afraid she's been waylaid by a young paramour, a potential rival for his affections. You're seated, Marquise, doing your sewing, as he returns. You know the lines? (*SHE nods, sitting.*) Good. Begin.

LA GRANGE assumes the role of Arnolphe to her Agnes. *LA FORET* enters, drawing a scowl from *MOLIERE*.

LA GRANGE

(*As ARNOLPHE*) Work in hand, Agnes? Your head hasn't turned, thank heaven. Are you glad that I'm home?

DU PARC

(*As AGNES*) Yes, I am.

LA GRANGE

Good. (*Sitting, HE motions to her to sit.*) Sit here by my knee. Have you kept as well as you appear to be?

DU PARC

Yes, except for the fleas which disturb me at night.

LA GRANGE

You will have someone to make that right.

DU PARC

I shall be extremely grateful for that.

LA GRANGE

Oh, I'm sure. What is it you're working at?

DU PARC

I've just finished your nightshirt and cap. Now—

LA FORET

(*Interrupting*) If I may interrupt, Master—

MOLIERE

No, you may not!

LA FORET

The scene lacks life! It's flat, if you ask me.

MOLIERE

I'll flatten you! It's a standard scene of introduction! We're presenting Agnes to the audience and making it clear that Arnolphe is suspicious of her.

LA FORET

He wants to make sure there's been no hanky-panky?

MOLIERE

Yes.

LA GRANGE

I like it.

DU PARC

You always like everything, Charles.

MOLIERE

Do you approve, La Foret? (*SHE shrugs.*) Thank you. Armande, will you read the role, please?

ARMANDE

But I don't know it.

MOLIERE

Speak extempore. Play it naturally. Don't be nervous.

ARMANDE

I'll try.

ARMANDE waits for DU PARC to give way. DU PARC pauses then rises haughtily. ARMANDE assumes her place.

LA GRANGE

Work in hand, Agnes? Your head hasn't turned, thank heaven. Are you glad that I'm home?

ARMANDE, with feeling, directs the line towards MOLIERE.

ARMANDE

Yes...I am.

MOLIERE

Fine! Superb! You shall be Agnes!

DU PARC

What, after three words of dialogue?

MOLIERE

She's right for it. Please, no debating.

DU PARC

(Raging) I never saw the like! This is preposterous, incredible! This red-cheeked cherub wanders in here and just because she is Madeleine's sister she gets the part right off, with no experience—the most important part in the play—

MOLIERE

There's another fine female role—

DU PARC

And you've given that to Madeleine! Where is my role? I'd like to know what I'm to do in this play, monsieur!

MOLIERE

Dancing, of course...the interludes...

DU PARC

And how do I develop my acting talent when I'm relegated to dancing the interludes? This is outrageous! I just read the one brief scene— If you'll give me a love scene to read—

MOLIERE

No love scenes, actually. The lovers don't meet in front of the audience until the last act.

DU PARC

How disagreeable! Do you expect an audience to remain interested that long?

LA FORET

That is a point, monsieur.

MOLIERE

Hold your tongue, woman!

LA FORET

But people like romance, monsieur.

DU PARC

This sounds like a very insipid play! I am glad not to be associated with it!

ARMANDE

(Rising to confront DU PARC) Excuse me, but how can you say that to Monsieur Moliere? He's written another splendid comedy. Don't you think so, Monsieur La Grange?

LA GRANGE

Indeed.

DU PARC

Indeed, my foot! And what do you know about theatre, child? Did the nuns teach you what makes a play successful or not?

ARMANDE

(Face to face) I know the difference between art and artifice!

DU PARC

You little vixen! You gnat-brained idiot of a girl! If you weren't Madeleine's sister I'd teach you some manners— *(Seizing ARMANDE)* — Maybe I will do just that!—

A mini-fight occurs between ARMANDE and DU PARC. As THEY struggle, OTHERS try to intercede and THEY eventually hold the two combatants apart.

MOLIERE

Ladies, ladies! We are still one happy family, are we not? Come, come... Let us put aside professional envy *(Stern glance at DU PARC)* and youthful conceit *(Eying ARMANDE)* and remember that as our ensemble prospers, so do we as individuals. *(THEY release the WOMEN who keep their distance...But if looks could kill.)* Marquise, if you lack a role in this production you'll have one in the next. I would never idle anyone of your caliber. Each has certain gifts, in combination. My task is to determine which of these combinations is right for a certain role, in a particular play. So, you see, I must sometimes become a little dictator. I must be arbitrary! Come now, Marquise, don't pout.

DU PARC

(Haughtily) If I am not needed here...I must attend to other business. *(Exits)*

MOLIERE

(Bowing to her backside) Mademoiselle... *(To LA FORET)* La Foret, how is Madeleine?

LA FORET

Quite ill, master. *(MOLIERE is troubled.)* Everyday she complains of being listless...lacking energy,

MOLIERE

I shall attend her.

MOLIERE starts to exit but ARMANDE catches his arm.

ARMANDE

Monsieur, I thank you so much! I hope I can reward your confidence.

MOLIERE

(Warmly) Your presence is my reward.

*MOLIERE kisses her hand and exits.
LIGHT FADE OUT.*

ACT I; SCENE FIVE

AT RISE: MUSIC transitions us to MOLIERE's sitting room. LIGHTS RISE on MOLIERE handing out script pages to LA GRANGE and BARON. BARON, still very shy, silently attends to MOLIERE during the scene. BOILEAU is also present with LA FORET in the wings.

MOLIERE

Look over these pages and imprint the cues and lines in your minds. You need to become the character, not just suggest—we need Du Parc for this scene! Gone? *(THEY shrug.)* We'll run the scene without her. La Foret can fill in. I—

MONTFLEURY enters in sartorial splendor, holding a cane and wearing a very stunning chapeau. HE is vain, pompous and speaks in the manner of someone who enjoys the sound of his own voice. HE strikes the floor with his cane once, then again.

MONTFLEURY

Mes amis, c'est moi! From the Hotel de Bourgogne I bring salutations; I trust I'm not interfering with your—lamentations.

BOILEAU

We have nothing to lament. Jean's plays are the toast of Paris!

LA GRANGE

Monsieur Montfleury! How often do you enter a house without knocking?

BOILEAU

You should wait to be announced, Monsieur. We had a bassoon ready.

MONTFLEURY

Your servants were absent, so I let myself in. Such a lapse in my house would be a very grave sin.

BOILEAU

He intends to talk in verse, I fear.

LA GRANGE

Sir! This is a rhyme-free house.

LA GRANGE & BOILEAU

We speak in prose here!

MONTFLEURY

Of course. Well, as it were—

MOLIERE

(Rising) I bid you welcome, Monsieur Montfleury. You do us honor, sir

MONTFLEURY

(Bowing low) Not at all, sir...as it were.

MOLIERE

(Returning his bow) Your servant, sir. *(CALLING)* La Foret! *(SHE enters.)* A chair for monsieur. A chair for the Hotel de Bourgogne!

LA FORET

That will have to be a huge one!

MOLIERE

Be quick about it, scatterbrain!

LA FORET

Oh yes, m'lord, right away, m'liege!

Places a chair behind MONTFLEURY. HE is about to sit down when SHE curtsies. Naturally, HE rises to bow.

LA FORET, *Continues*

Monsieur.

MONTFLEURY

(Always the gentleman) Mademoiselle.

HE again starts to sit, but SHE takes a step back and curtsies again.

LA FORET

Monsieur.

MONTFLEURY

(Half rising, bows again) Mademoiselle.

LA FORET smirks then busies herself elsewhere.

BOILEAU

Monsieur...do tell us what brings you to the Rue de Richelieu.

MONTFLEURY sits with a wary eye on LA FORET.

MONTFLEURY

I come, gentlemen, on my own, not representing my company. I trust that point is clear.

LA GRANGE

Very clear indeed.

MONTFLEURY

It is always satisfying, as it were, to know that one is understood.

LA GRANGE

So true.

MONTFLEURY

I have come to offer some advice which I believe you will find useful and not, as it were, take amiss. Moliere... *(Pausing, posing for effect)* You are not so fine a dramatist as you may think.

MOLIERE

Oh, I know that I am not as good as I think I am. But then, I never thought I was.

MONTFLEURY

You jest, but I must warn you that in your brief sojourn on the Paris stage you have made some real enemies. In the long run that will be one of the two factors combining, as it were, to ruin your ambitions.

MOLIERE

Oh? Well, I can manage my enemies.

MONTFLEURY

Do not treat them lightly. I am not among them, understand. I speak impartially, as it were. But enemies can threaten one's career. That is the practical side of the matter. On the spiritual side, I must say it is not very Christian to offend people as you do.

MOLIERE

Jesus offended the Pharisees, did he not?

MONTFLEURY

You are not Jesus.

MOLIERE

What? And nobody told me! But to the question of placating one's enemies. I may be hanged for it someday but I prefer candor to flattery. La Foret, the story!

LA FORET

Story? Which story?

MOLIERE

Diogenes, of course.

LA FORET

(As if she has told it many times) Oh yes, dear Diogenes. The philosopher Diogenes was washing lentils to make soup, in front of the philosopher Aristippus, who had acquired a comfortable living by paying court to the King. Aristippus sneered, "If you had learned to flatter the King you would not have to live on such poor food as lentils." Diogenes replied, *(Gestures to BOILEAU and LA GRANGE who join in)*... "If you had learned to live on lentils you would not have to flatter the King!"

There are general guffaws from ALL but MONTFLEURY.

MONTFLEURY

(Dryly) In my place a parlor maid would serve the wine and not the witticism, as it were. But *there* is another issue that I must raise. It is the question of art. *(Becoming increasingly declamatory; with large gestures and flourishes)* Our companies are very different. We create tragic moments and we do them well. We have discernment. We produce an ensemble effect of the highest magnitude to mine the rich depths of human feeling...

MOLIERE

(Impatiently) Yes, yes...?

MONTFLEURY

Your players have a certain penchant for farce, hardly high comedy. Farce. You have, I concede, found some human failings and exposed them with some verve and vivacity but—to come to the point—

MOLIERE

Oh yes, do come to the point!

MONTFLEURY

I will give you this wisdom, monsieur—seek the grand style! Your actors lack size, as it were. Their movements are mundane, their lines often trivial.

MOLIERE

We try to achieve a certain naturalness, monsieur.

MONTFLEURY

Naturalness! Naturalness is for the street, the market, the kitchen!

As HE becomes ever more flamboyant, BOILEAU AND LA GRANGE ape him upstage. MOLIERE stifles laughter.

MONTFLEURY, *Continues*

The stage calls for a different quality, a different cadence, the sort of speech that sets the heart racing and the lungs pumping. The theatre calls for giants brandishing swords, not puppets packing toothpicks!

MOLIERE

Puppets packing toothpicks! I'm impressed!

MONTFLEURY

Sir, I hope that my advice is not misplaced or offensive, as it were.

MOLIERE

Sir, I take it in the spirit in which it was offered.

MONTFLEURY

Excellent. I know that you are a gentleman. But do remember the Lord Jesus, and beware of making enemies.

MOLIERE

He didn't tell us not to make enemies, but to love the ones we make.

MONTFLEURY

A well-turned phrase. (*Ominously*) But his enemies did him in.

This drops on the ASSEMBLY like a lead balloon. There is heavy silence. MONTLEURY begins to take his leave.

MONTFLEURY

(*Addressing LA GRANGE and BOILEAU*) Good day to you, gentlemen. (*MONTFLUERY bows to LA GRANGE and BOILEAU then turns to MOLIERE.*) And to you, sir. (*MOLIERE rises.*) Your humble servant, sir. (*Bows*)

MOLIERE

No, yours, sir. (*Bows*)

What follows is an exaggerated leave-taking ritual with each trying to out-bow and out-do the other, with MOLIERE having his fun, of course. BOILEAU and LA GRANGE mimic the action just out of Montfleury's vision. The bit should be fast-paced; Chaplinesque in style.

MONTFLEURY

No sir, I am your most obedient and humble servant. (*Bows*)

MOLIERE

No sir, I am yours, sir, today and tomorrow and forever. I insist upon it. (*Bows*)

MONTFLEURY

Not at all, sir. (*Bows*)

MOLIERE

Oh yes, sir. (*Bows*)

MONTFLEURY

No, I am in your debt, sir. (*Bows*) I shall be in your debt forever, sir.

MOLIERE

No, sir. (*Bows*)

MONTFLEURY

Yes, sir. (*Bows*)

MOLIERE

No, sir. (*Bows*)

MONTFLEURY

(*With his most impressive bow yet*) I insist upon it, sir, with all my heart

.

MOLIERE

(*Smiles, but without bowing*) Then I thank you, sir, with all my heart and soul.

LA GRANGE AND BOILEAU

(*Upstage*) As it were!

MONTFLEURY does a “take”, realizing he’s been taken, and exits with a “Humph!” The *OTHERS* share a good laugh at his expense.

LA FORET

You turned him deftly, gentlemen.

BOILEAU

Gone—with his sartorial splendor!

MOLIERE

That hat would upstage the pope!

LIGHTS FADE OUT.

ACT I; SCENE SIX

AT RISE: *MUSIC*, perhaps a sentimental musing from a single violin transitions the scene as a *SOFT LIGHT* reveals *MOLIERE* and *ARMANDE* sitting face to face. *MOLIERE* smiles, nervously clearing his throat. *HE* rises, paces a few steps, then returns to his chair. With some trepidation, like a swimmer facing cold water, *HE* finally plunges in.)

MOLIERE

I want to ask you a question, Armande. I am going to blurt it straight out!

ARMANDE

Yes, monsieur?

MOLIERE

You must call me Jean.

ARMANDE

Yes, Jean?

MOLIERE

Ah...Perhaps—not so straight out. Armande... (*HE* rises, fidgets nervously, sits)Do you think it is possible for a young woman to love a man who is—ah—not her age?

ARMANDE

Younger?

MOLIERE

No, older than she.

ARMANDE

(Playing him along) Oh, I don't know. It would depend. There is something intriguing about some men of middle age.

MOLIERE

Ah!

ARMANDE

On the other hand, they are often straight-laced.

MOLIERE

Oh...

ARMANDE

Conservative. Set in their ways.

MOLIERE

I see.

ARMANDE

And yet they have a certain maturity. *(MOLIERE is pleased.)* As for the young men...

MOLIERE

Yes—the young men?

ARMANDE

They are often so dashing and handsome!

MOLIERE

Ah!

ARMANDE

And virile. Some are so impetuous yet—virile.

MOLIERE

(Unhappily) Oh, I suppose virility is something to be desired.

ARMANDE

But there is a certain conceit in young men.

(Rising; reciting)

“They fancy that everything must give way
Before their golden locks, s'il vous plait;

ARMANDE, *Continued*

(*Crossing to MOLIERE*)

And think they have said the cleverest witticism
When they spout off their silly criticism...”

MOLIERE

Thank you for quoting my own play to me but—

ARMANDE

Sssh!

(*Places her finger to his lips and continues*)

“But I value more highly the love of older men
Than all the giddy raptures of a youthful courtesan.”

*ARMANDE wraps her arms around
MOLIERE and kisses his neck. Surprised
and pleased, HE responds warmly as
LIGHTS FADE OUT.*

ACT I; SCENE SEVEN

*AT RISE: A MUSICAL BRIDGE takes us to
Madeleine’s bed chamber. LIGHTS
reveal MADELEINE sitting at her vanity
looking into a mirror as SHE puts on her
make-up. ARMANDE sits behind her
looking into the same mirror, adjusting
her hair. After a moment, ARMANDE
walks away thoughtfully.*

ARMANDE

Sister...Jean has asked me to marry him.

MADELEINE

Oh?

ARMANDE

I think I shall.

MADELEINE

Oh!

ARMANDE

He is bright and famous, and if he is not handsome he is at least distinguished.

MADELEINE

Oh, Armande!

ARMANDE

Age is no barrier. Don't you think that people of different ages can live agreeably together if they respect each other?

MADELEINE

Armande...

ARMANDE

Why do you say, "Armande?" Why do you keep saying "Oh?"

MADELEINE

Armande... You are not in love with Jean-Baptiste Poquelin. You love the theatrical genius Moliere.

ARMANDE

And what of it? You love the theatre.

MADELEINE

But also Jean. You know we have had our – flings.

ARMANDE

Yes. I don't care about that if you don't. You never married.

MADELEINE

Oh, we spoke of it. He pressed me. But I loved him too much.

ARMANDE

(Incredulous) Too much to get married?

MADELEINE

A man can feel trapped, little sister. Such a man needs the freedom to create, without ties, without obligation to wife and family. I loved him too much to marry him.

ARMANDE

Nonsense. How can marriage destroy a person?

MADELEINE

It can, believe me. You know... I have had other men. I enjoy the intimacy. I like caring for men. I love them for what I can give them

ARMANDE

I love them for what they can give me.

MADELEINE

That is the difference between us. Armande—there are young men your age who can give you what you need. Michel Baron, for example. Jean thinks he has great potential.

ARMANDE

That actor from the children's troupe? I haven't spoken to this Baron, but I hear that the boy is not only callow but shallow.

MADELEINE

He's attractive and has a fine stage voice. Jean's trying to arrange a contract for him.

ARMANDE

Will you forget Baron, sister! If you're still carrying the torch for Jean—

MADELEINE

No, it's not that. But Armande...can you make him happy?

ARMANDE

I should think so! I am vivacious and attractive enough, and in the prime of life.

MADELEINE

(Sighs) If there was nothing else to happiness...

ARMANDE

Happiness! Do you think you're making him happy, Madeleine? Your wearisome face— that sigh that says to him, we've meant so much to each other and don't you forget it! You're such an eloquent sigher, sister.

MADELEINE

(Sighs) It comes with age.

ARMANDE

(Bluntly) I have a fresh face, sister. He'll appreciate that when he gets out of bed in the morning.

MADELEINE slaps her hard. ARMANDE, surprised and wounded, crosses down stage. MADELEINE follows, obviously distressed. THEY slowly turn to look at each other. BLACKOUT followed by TRANSITIONAL MUSIC.

ACT I; SCENE EIGHT

AT RISE: LIGHTS UP on Moliere's chamber. There is a writing desk as well as a bed. ARMANDE stands by the bed. LA FORET is helping her into a nightgown and into bed as MOLIERE enters from without. LA FORET takes his hat and cloak.

MOLIERE

Thank you, La Foret. That will be all.

LA FORET

Monsieur.

With a knowing glance at the audience, LA FORET exits. MOLIERE stands looking absently at ARMANDE. SHE sits up in bed, smiling coyly. MOLIERE seems uncertain as to his next move.

MOLIERE

How are you, my pet?

ARMANDE

Quite well, my dearest.

MOLIERE

This is still new to me. That is—ah—marriage. *(Sitting on bed)* I must feel my way into it. *(Removing his boots)* I don't want it to pinch like a new pair of boots.

ARMANDE

I am not the pinching kind.

MOLIERE

(Hesitates, then turns to her) You are so lovely, my dear.

ARMANDE

Don't you think my chin is too hard?

MOLIERE

Oh no... *(Touching it)* It is the finest chin I have seen. Your eyes are pools of wine and your cheeks are fresh as peaches on the vine. And this is the daintiest mouth in the entire kingdom.

MOLIERE kisses *ARMANDE* lightly on the mouth.

ARMANDE

Peaches don't grow on vines. Are my teeth yellow?

MOLIERE

No, white as snow. Your neck is divine. And your knees...

ARMANDE

(As HE feels her knees) They're knobby, aren't they?

MOLIERE

They perform their function, which is to hinge your legs.

ARMANDE

(Giggling) You're tickling me, you horrid man!

SHE tickles him back. THEY laugh— A moment of genuine horseplay. Then MOLIERE stops abruptly as an idea forms in his head. HE snaps his fingers, rising.

MOLIERE

Ah...!

ARMANDE

What? What is it?

MOLIERE

This is what he will do with Elmire *(Pronounced "El-meer")* when he meets her.

ARMANDE

Who?

MOLIERE

Tartuffe.

ARMANDE

Oh. *(Without enthusiasm)* Your new play.

MOLIERE

(Excited) Tartuffe is a hypocrite who pretends to be religious in order to take advantage of people. When he discovers Elmire alone in her room—Elmire's his host's wife—he finds her very desirable. But he must be subtle, taking liberties, yet protecting himself. He can put his

MOLIERE, *Continued*

hand on her knee and when she says something he will say that he is only admiring the fabric and then she says that she's ticklish and asks him to remove his hand.

ARMANDE

Jean, dear!

MOLIERE

And then he will admire her collar (*Touching hers*), commenting on the workmanship in the lace when in fact he likes the shape of the nape— her neck, I mean.

ARMANDE

Dearest...do forget Tartuffe and consider me!

MOLIERE

Yes, my pet. Yes, you are right for Elmire. It's perfect!

ARMANDE

(*Drawing him closer*) And you will play Tartuffe to my Elmire!

MOLIERE

Oh no, I will be Orgon. Du Croissey is to play Tartuffe. (*ARMANDE is deflated.*) There will be two scenes between you. Excuse me, just for a moment, dear. (*Crosses to his desk and begins writing*) Ideas are elusive.

ARMANDE

Please, Jean!

MOLIERE

One moment, dearest.

ARMANDE

Jean, my dear darling Jean.

MOLIERE

Just a bit of dialogue, dearest. Tartuffe desiring Elmire—well, seducing Elmire—

ARMANDE

Husband! Seduce me!

MOLIERE

Listen to this: Tartuffe cloaks his carnal desire with religious sentiment that everyone sees through except Elmire's husband. Tartuffe says to Elmire:

“The affection we owe to heaven above
Does not erase our more earthly loves;
Our senses may be charmed all the more

MOLIERE, *Continued*

By those heaven-sent creatures I adore...”

He is talking of the feminine gender, of course.

MOLIERE rises, turns and crosses to ARMANDE, addressing her as if she were Elmire. HE invents his lines, haltingly, as HE continues.

MOLIERE, *Continues*

“On your fair countenance is such beauty displayed
It dazzles my eyes beyond jewels or jade;
Such virtue and loveliness in you is sealed
That God’s grandest gifts are in you revealed.”

ARMANDE

Very charming. (*Reaching for him*) But come to bed, my love!

MOLIERE sits on the bed, but quickly rises.

MOLIERE

I must scribble it down before I forget. (*Back at his desk*) “...that God’s grandest gifts are in you...revealed....”

ARMANDE drops her robe on the bed, revealing a filmy gown. SHE then approaches MOLIERE from behind, wrapping her arms around him.

ARMANDE

Jean-Baptiste! My dear, dear husband!

ARMANDE crosses around his desk to face him SHE provocatively drops her negligee off her shoulders, leaving them bare.

MOLIERE

(*Eyes to the paper, pen working the page*) Yes, my pet?

ARMANDE

Do I look like a spaniel? (*Turns and strides back to bed*) I am not your pet! I am your wife, Jean, and I want you!

MOLIERE

Just a moment, dearest. (*Writing*) Just a minute, my pet.

ARMANDE picks up her robe, emits an anguished wail then falls back on the bed, pulling the robe over her head. *MOLIERE* smiles vacantly then returns to his parchment as **LIGHTS FADE OUT.**

ACT I; SCENE NINE

AT RISE: The stage is set for Moliere's sitting room. In the darkness we hear a boisterous version of the old children's song, "FRERE JAQUES". It is evening. The **LIGHTS RISE** revealing *MOLIERE* sitting in a corner of the room, disconsolate. Members of the *COMPANY*, having been celebrating at a local café, come trooping in; first *LA GRANGE* and *BOILEAU*, then *BARON* in the hands of *ARMANDE* and *MADELEINE*. *THEY* are intoxicated – *BARON* the most affected– and *THEY* do not notice *MOLIERE*. *THEY* dance or prance about, arms linked.

LA GRANGE AND BOILEAU, Singing

(
"Frere Jaques, Frere Jacques, dormez-vous, dormez-vous?
Sonnez les matines, sonnez les matines;
Din din dong, din din, dong..."

MADELEINE, BARON, AND ARMANDE
join in.

COMPANY, Singing

"Frere Jacques, Frere Jacques, dormez-vous, dormez-vous?
Sonnez les matines, sonnez les matines;
Din din ding, din din dong..."

THEY stagger, falling into chairs or onto the floor. *BOILEAU* continues to hum the tune.

LA GRANGE

I think we're supposed to sing it—as a round...

MADELEINE

I think you've had one round too many.

LA GRANGE

My mother put me to sleep with that song.

BOILEAU

(Stops humming) She was supposed to wake you up with it.

LA GRANGE

She woke me up with a broomstick.

THEY laugh.

MADELEINE

I don't believe that, Charles.

BARON rouses himself and begins a little song and dance.

BARON, *Singing*

Mirth and merriment, mirth and merriment.
Was so mush fun at Café la Mer.

The OTHERS join in.

COMPANY, *Singing*

Mirth and merriment, mirth and merriment
Was so mush fun—

Suddenly BARON drops to the floor in a stupor. The OTHERS go to him.

ARMANDE

What's wrong with him?

MADELEINE

He had a bit too much cognac.

BOILEAU

Too much for a wee little fella?

THEY help BARON up, seating him on a chair.

LA GRANGE

A mere stripling. Shoulda stopped him from overloading on lev—levity. It was his first opening night.

ARMANDE

And what an amazing opening night!

MADELEINE

What a wonderful time we had!

BOILEAU

Wonderful. All those toasts to “Tartuffe”.

MADELEINE

Everyone wanted to toast Moliere.

BOILEAU

Made the company some money, eh, Charles?

MADELEINE

It had better; we put all our reserves into it. What will you do with your share, Charles?

LA GRANGE

Buy a farm countryside—for my brother.

BOILEAU

You don’t have a brother.

Guffaws abound.

LA GRANGE

If I did I would. He’s always wanted a farm.

The laughter continues.

ARMANDE

I’m going to buy a new war—war—

BOILEAU

War?

ARMANDE

Drobe. Wardrobe!

And yet more laughter.

LA GRANGE

I wanna get me dear old mudda new buncha boots. New paira boots.

ARMANDE

You better buy a speech tutor. Your gibberish is unpalatable and unintelligibobble

BOILEAU notices MOLIERE sulking and crosses to him.

BOILEAU

We missed you at Café la Mer!

ARMANDE

Jean, they loved the play! “Tartuffe” is the hit of Paris!

BOILEAU

It’s your masterpiece, Jean. Let’s hear it for the Masterpiece of the Master!

ALL

(Lustily) The Masterpiece of the Master!

ARMANDE

And for the brilliant actor who played Orgon to my Elmire!

MADELEINE

And to my Dorine!

ARMANDE

Where were you anyway? *(Beat)* Jean?

MOLIERE

(Rising...heavily) With the king.

MADELEINE

Oh, the king, of course! I’ve never seen him laugh like that!

BOILEAU

Neither have I!

MADELEINE

He had to cover his mouth with his hand, he was laughing so!

ARMANDE

What did he say?

LA GRANGE

Did he like it?

MOLIERE does not respond.

MADELEINE

Jean, what's the matter? (*Beat*) Aren't you feeling well?

MOLIERE lurches past them, stands apart. BOILEAU follows.

BOILEAU

Apparently his lordship's not in the mood to answer our questions. Let's sing some more.

The revelry renews.

COMPANY

“Frere Jacques, Frere Jacques, dormez-vous, dormez-vous?
Sonnez les matines, sonnez les matines;
Din din ding, din din dong...”

As THEY sing, MOLIERE turns, sighing.

MOLIERE

The king...has banned...the play!

MADELEINE

Quiet everyone! I said quiet! (*Their voices dribble out.*) What, Jean? What did you say?

MOLIERE

(*Deadly serious*) The king has banned “Tartuffe”. There will be no more performances.

Rouses from his stupor, BARON begins singing.

BARON

Mirth'n merry-men, mirth'n merry-men...

The COMPANY descends upon BARON, shushing him. ALL are silent

BOILEAU

Banned? Oh...of course. Very funny! Listen everybody! A new tune by Lully! *The King has banned “Tartuffe”...*

ALL except MADELEINE picks up this phrase and improvise a chant. MADELEINE crosses to MOLIERE.

THEY whisper and then SHE turns to the revelers.

MADELEINE

Listen, you drunken fools! He's not joking. "Tartuffe" is banned!

SEVERAL still chortle. THEY do not believe it.

LA GRANGE

I suppose he's banned "School for Wives" as well?

ARMANDE

And "School for Husbands"? Or is that has-beens?

MOLIERE

(Firmly) The bishops find it sacrilegious. They've refused to approve its public license. The Archbishop's behind them. So's the President of Paris. The King—

BOILEAU

The King should stand up to them!

MADELEINE

Will he let you make changes? Revisions?

MOLIERE

Perhaps. But he suggested we drop it and do something else.

Absolute silence as it sinks in. Then comes one more attempt at denial.

LA GRANGE

Let's pretend we didn't hear all this.

BOILEAU

Shall we go out and come in again?

BOILEAU and LA GRANGE turn and together stride to the doorway. THEY spin around and pose, arms wide, as if expecting applause. MOLIERE does not respond. THEY drop their pose. After a moment, each responds slowly, anxiously.

ARMANDE

We have nothing else ready.

MADELEINE

An empty theatre is an empty purse, and an empty purse...

BOILEAU

What about Jean Racine's new play...?

MOLIERE

It's still rough. Three scenes to write, at least.

MADELEINE

There are always the Commedia farces...Jean?

MOLIERE

(Angrily) We're not doing those old farces! We're beyond that! I'm beyond that!

ARMANDE

(After a beat) What are you going to do, Jean?

MOLIERE

I don't know. I have to think. Maybe I should see his majesty again.

BOILEAU

Let me go this time. I think he likes my poetry. And...maybe Armande?

MOLIERE

That's good of you, Nicolas. But my arguments were—vigorous. I don't think you can make the case any more eloquently.

BOILEAU

No, no...But perhaps more...diplomatically?

*LIGHTS FADE OUT.
TRANSITIONAL MUSIC.*

ACT I; SCENE TEN

LIGHTS RISE on the desk in Moliere's chamber where MOLIERE, shivering with cold, works fervently. Opposite, yet to be revealed, stands the royal throne where KING LOUIS will later appear. LA FORET is busy upstage dusting. MOLIERE calls loudly, unaware of her presence in the room.

MOLIERE

La Foret! La Foret!

LA FORET

Yes, monsieur?

MOLIERE

Oh, there you are! Either shut a window or bring me a blanket. *(Coughs)* There's a chill wind whipping through the house.

LA FORET

It's an ill wind indeed that blows no one good.

MOLIERE

Don't quote proverbs, fasten the shutters!

LA FORET

(Busy with shutters) Close the shutters, open the shutters, close, open, close. I wish it was as easy to follow orders as to give them. *(Crossing to him)* What's that you're working on?

MOLIERE

Never mind, busybody!

LA FORET

Busybody? You can do better than that!

MOLIERE

You nosy, scatterbrained, ill-tempered excuse for a housekeeper!

LA FORET

That's better done, monsieur. Ah... *(Picking up a page of his work)* Another placet? The king must be exhausted from reading your petitions on "Tartuffe". I still don't understand how he could ban that play when the audience loved it so! But it's the bishops, eh? The Church

LA FORET, *Continued*

objects? Hmm. (*Reading*) “Sire, the duty of comedy being to correct men’s errors in the course of...amusing them.” (*Looking to MOLIERE*) Can plays really change human nature?

MOLIERE

(*Crossly*) God, I hope so! (*Seizing the papers*) Enough! I have to complete this!

LA FORET

Do you believe it, monsieur? Or is it just clever sophistry to catch the King?

MOLIERE

(*Exhausted*) Sometimes, my dear little gadfly...I’m not quite sure what I believe. (*With a dismissive gesture*) Please, La Foret, I must finish!

LA FORET exits, petulantly. MOLIERE signs his name to the placet, then reads.

MOLIERE, *Continues*

“I do not doubt, sire, that the people whom I depict in my comedy will use every means of influencing your majesty...Beyond question they will not fail to inform your majesty that my play has shocked everybody. But the plain truth, sire...”

LIGHTS CROSS-FADE to the KING who is seated on his throne, reading MOLIERE’s petition. ARMANDE and BOILEAU stand nearby.

KING LOUIS

“...the plain truth, sire, is that the most revered critics have judged its performance to be a healthy influence, and what is surprising is that genuinely sincere people should defer to the horrible hypocrites who only pretend to be religious. Hmmm. Is this true? What critics, eh? What revered critics have praised this “Tartuffe”?”

BOILEAU

Your majesty, many esteemed artists and writers have commended “Tartuffe”.

KING LOUIS

Is that so? (*A beat, then*) Nicolas, my good friend, don’t stand on ceremony. Please...

HE indicates two chairs. BOILEAU sits. ARMANDE starts towards another but the KING stops her.

KING LOUIS, *Continues*

Not you, my lovely. You are most attractive just—standing there.

ARMANDE

Thank you, my liege. But—

KING LOUIS

My position is rather—delicate. The Jansenists—a moralistic bunch of churchmen, the “holier-than-thous”—are suspicious of entertainment such as concerts and theatre. They include some members of the old court—the Queen Mother herself belongs—and they say Moliere mocks piety by making this Tartuffe character so—lecherous.

ARMANDE

But Moliere has rewritten the play so that—

KING LOUIS

Please! Just stand there, my lovely, perhaps a bit more—in profile?

BOILEAU

He’s made Tartuffe clearly the villain—and much less a chaplain, more secular, as you can see by the way he’s to be dressed—

KING LOUIS

The fulminations against “Tartuffe”—I have to take them seriously. The archbishop has threatened excommunication for any who attend the play. He’s said that under the pretext of condemning hypocrisy the play attacks the truly devout and exposes them to insults and (*Making a face*) ...calumny. It diverts them from the path of virtue. What say you, Nicolas?

BOILEAU

My liege, whoever condemns “Tartuffe” also condemns the teachings of Jesus Christ.

KING LOUIS

(*Sardonically*) That’s strong language from an avowed atheist!

ARMANDE

With your permission, sire—

KING LOUIS

Must you speak? You don’t know how gorgeous you are just—

ARMANDE

(*Hotly*) Your highness, with respect, I’m not here to pose for a portrait!

KING LOUIS

Aha! The lady has spice and spunk. Well, then...

ARMANDE

I am certain it has not escaped your majesty’s notice that many of our clergy have been involved in immoral behavior.

KING LOUIS

Allegedly involved.

ARMANDE

Moliere is simply holding up a moral mirror to this madness.

KING LOUIS

Some priests are—rather too fond—of women. Does this give Moliere the right—that is, did not Jesus say something about not judging others? But, ah—did dear Jean invent this character with a particular person in mind?

ARMANDE

No, your majesty.

KING LOUIS

Mmm. ..There are hypocrites here in Versailles, and a few genuinely pious people. Understand—they know about my affairs and remind me that my mother—God bless her silly soul—is a saint and that my father, who in my opinion didn't know what he was missing, called himself Louis the Chaste! (*Crossing to ARMANDE*) I shall never be called Louis the Chaste, mademoiselle.

ARMANDE

No, my liege?

KING LOUIS

No. (*Wearily*) So the President of Paris condemns the play, along with many bishops. "Religion," they say, "cannot be confused with entertainment." There I disagree. Some of the most religious people I know are the most entertaining. They say that Lady Minolta is so pious that when she yawns through a sermon she makes the sign of the cross with her mouth. (*Permits himself a chuckle.*) However... (*Musing*) there is the Church, and the arts, and the question of what is politic and...perhaps the time is not yet ripe...

There is a long pause. ARMANDE and BOILEAU anxiously exchange glances.

BOILEAU

Your Highness...what shall we tell Moliere? May he stage "Tartuffe"?

KING LOUIS

Tell him to...wait.

BOILEAU bows, turns to leave. ARMANDE curtsies, then as she turns the KING catches her arm. HE smiles at the confused young lady. BOILEAU stops, glancing at them. The KING speaks to her quite tenderly.

KING LOUIS, *Continued*

And you, my enchantress. Will you wait?

ARMANDE faces front. *KING LOUIS* embraces her from behind as the *LIGHTS FADE OUT*. *TRANSITIONAL MUSIC*.

ACT I; SCENE ELEVEN

AT RISE: *Moliere's chambers. A slightly tipsy LA FORET is lying on the bed. MOLIERE, seated on the floor at the foot of the bed, shares a flagon of wine with LA FORET.*

MOLIERE

But we can still do private readings, La Foret.

LA FORET

Oh, I know. Four eminent citizens called here today who want you to present "Tartuffe" in their own homes. You shall have quite a social calendar in no time.

MOLIERE

Where's Armande?

LA FORET

Not back yet. Shopping, probably.

MOLIERE

I have modified the character, you know. (*Taking a sip*) But—but this is my best Burgundy! La Foret—this was to be saved for rare and festive occasions!

LA FORET

It is my opinion, and that of my mother before me— (*Crossing herself*) — that a man most needs the support of wine and women when he is discouraged, not when he stands astride the world.

SHE leans her head on Moliere's back. MOLIERE, touched by this, turns and takes her hand and nods. After a moment HE rises to resume work at his desk.

MOLIERE

We shall have five acts instead of three, and the first two will prepare the audience for this imposter. Tartuffe the villain—who can mistake it? And Cleante's speech shall clearly

MOLIERE, *Continued*

distinguish between true and false piety. I am not an atheist, mademoiselle, whatever they say at the market.

LA FORET

They say a good many things.

MOLIERE

Tell them what I say: that Christian perfection is a noble goal. That Christ our Lord showed us how to live truly and well. That we must love others and esteem them— (*Irate*) But I hate and despise the selfish connivings of pretend zealots! I hate those who display their religion like a new dress or a suit of clothes.

HE coughs and sags in his seat.

LA FORET

Take another swallow, monsieur. How do you end the play?

MOLIERE

With the demise of Tartuffe—his arrest and banishment.

LA FORET

Oh, I should think the best ending would be a tragic one—Tartuffe the victor and Orgon the victim, driven out of his own house!

MOLIERE

No, no! The play will end when the officer that Tartuffe brings to arrest Orgon turns out to be, instead, an agent of the king who will arrest Tartuffe.

LA FORET

What a dramatic surprise! But will the audience accept such a contrived denouement? Things don't work out so well in real life.

MOLIERE

God writes life, and I write comedy. I grant you, this is not the most artistic ending, but it will do. And I have included a few perfumed phrases—well, a fulsome speech or two. Tributes to his majesty's wisdom and so forth.

LA FORET

I thought you were above flattery, monsieur.

MOLIERE

The King has been a generous patron. Besides...I never was very fond of lentils.

LA FORET

I still don't care for your denouement.

MOLIERE

It does its job, which is to end the play.

There is a flare of Victorious MUSIC as the LIGHTS FADE into a spot on LA GRANGE, who speaks directly to the Audience.

LA GRANGE

Victory at last! For “Tartuffe” and the God of Laughter! His majesty had permitted us to resume performances, ending a five-year ban on Jean’s best work. The news of that event spread widely and, on opening night, crowds stormed the Palais-Royale. My books, always meticulously kept, (*Smiling broadly*), showed a record take of—ah— (*Opening his ledger*) —2,958 livres! No longer did I have to resort to—legerdemain— (*With a wink*) —to keep this company solvent.

With his second attempt to make the pun, HE responds to the Audience’s reaction, then closes the book. The SPOT FADES OUT.

ACT I; SCENE TWELVE

AT RISE: Moliere’s sitting room. MOLIERE is helping ARMANDE with her coat, having just come in.

MOLIERE

“Tartuffe” is the talk of the town! People at the markets and on street-corners, buzzing about this line or that and discussing who they know that resembles this character or that one.

ARMANDE

Oh, yes!

MOLIERE

What a struggle it was. (*Embracing her*) The King finally saw the light! All those revisions, my letters, and Boileau’s pleading...

ARMANDE

And so forth.

MOLIERE

And my journey to Holland during the war. I went straight to the military camp to lay my petition on his majesty’s desk. (*Beat*) What did you mean by “and so forth”?

Oh, nothing.

ARMANDE

There is a KNOCK at the chamber door.

What do you mean by “nothing”?

MOLIERE

(*Shrugs, awkwardly*) Nothing is—nothing!

ARMANDE

The KNOCKING becomes more insistent. MOLIERE hesitates to answer. Finally HE responds.

(*Shouting*) Entrez! What jackass would this be? Come in, dammit!

MOLIERE

MICHEL BARON enters, alarmed at MOLIERE’s tone.

Baron, you—imbecile! This is the worst-timed entrance I’ve ever seen!

MOLIERE

I’m sorry, Master.

BARON

What are you doing here?

MOLIERE

Our rehearsal. With Armande, for “Psyche”. At Versailles. You told me—

BARON

Oh that. (*Hesitates, looks at ARMANDE*) All right then.

MOLIERE

(*Kissing her hand*) Mademoiselle, I am deeply honored to be working with you.

BARON

(*Not without interest*) Monsieur.

ARMANDE

Another silly pastoral to amuse the court. Silly nonsense. But kings command—

MOLIERE

And we obey.

ARMANDE

MOLIERE

Armande, I've been coaching Baron privately, as he will play "Love" to your "Psyche." Let's start with the wooing scene.

BARON and ARMANDE take positions facing each other. BARON, very shy in her presence, begins speaking at some distance from ARMANDE, but delivers the lines with sincerity.

BARON

(As "Love") I am jealous, my Psyche, jealous of all nature. The sun's rays kiss you too often; your tresses are too sensible to the wooing of the breeze; no sooner does it caress them than I murmur. The very air which you breathe—

MOLIERE

Good heavens, man, closer—

BARON

—passes with too much pleasure between your lips—

MOLIERE shoves BARON towards ARMANDE. His voice breaks as HE continues.

BARON, *Continues*

—your robes cling too closely to your form—

MOLIERE

So touch her robe, caress her hair—take her waist, man, she won't break! (*Demonstrates*) Let your body express your intense affection!

BARON

Yes, Master, I—I will try harder.

HE takes her arm—SHE stands still, bemused by this tyro. THEY break apart as LA FORET bustles in, quite agitated.

LA FORET

Monsieur, it's Madeleine. She's very ill. She's been asking for you.

MOLIERE

Tell her I'll be in soon.

LA FORET

It's more serious this time. It's the fever. She's almost—delirious.

MOLIERE

(Disturbed) Delirious? *(Beat)* I need to see Madeleine. Armande, you'll want to stop in later. Just spend some time on your own now, the two of you. Work on the dancing—the interludes.

MOLIERE turns and abruptly exits. BARON, somewhat perplexed and upset with himself, turns from ARMANDE and strides across the room. HE stops. ARMANDE saunters away opposite then stops. THEY both turn to gaze with some interest in one another. A MINUET is heard. ARMANDE crosses down center and holds her arms in a dance posture, awaiting his response. BARON hesitates, caught between his attraction to ARMANDE and his natural reticence. Finally, HE relinquishes and steps into her arms. ARMANDE takes the lead, directing the tempo. THEY dance. After a few turns and a spin by ARMANDE, THEY stop. Now BARON draws ARMANDE closer to him. THEY gaze into each other's eyes for a long moment. The MUSIC and LIGHTS Fade OUT.

END ACT I

ACT II; PROLOGUE

AT RISE: MUSIC leads into a SPOTLIGHT on LA GRANGE, who stands in front of a dimly lit stage set for Madeleine's bed chamber. MADELEINE is barely seen, stretched out on the bed with LA FORET sitting nearby, her hand in her hands. A MAN kneels by the bed. LA GRANGE steps forward, and with a wave of his hand, the MUSIC ends.

LA GRANGE

La Grange here. Ladies and gentleman, one of my tasks for the Illustrious Theatre was to be its orator. That's promoter, spokesman—shill, if you will. During intermission I would beg that audience to return, with all their friends and neighbors, to attend the next performance...or a new play that would be opening the following week, on a certain day at a certain time. I was rather good at it, frankly, a shill with some skill. And as you know, I kept

LA GRANGE, *Continued*

the book on this company. (*Taps his ledger with pride*) There were times when our work was profitable and times when it hardly paid the costumer, the copier, or kept the company afloat... at least until we became more prominent in Paris. (*Beat; takes a step or two*) This ledger, my friends, is also a register. In it I not only record the cold figures but arrivals and departures—names and dates, you understand. Births and deaths. That said, life goes on. And in this business you go on stage almost daily and become someone else. And for those two hours before the footlights you can escape these earthen bounds. You can ignore your own—mortality. For a moment. Those two hours. (*Pondering*) Ah—where was I? Oh, the next play, yes, the shill with the skill must—actually, I have forgotten the name of the next play. We are all so distracted these days. Forgive me. The orator has no prompter, you see. (*LA GRANGE is uncharacteristically disoriented.*) Pardonnez-moi, mes amis.

LA GRANGE shuts his ledger with a loud clap, startling himself. HE turns on his heels and exits. SPOTLIGHT OUT.

ACT II; SCENE ONE

AT RISE: LIGHTS RISE on Madeleine's chamber. MADELEINE, silent and still, lies prone on her bed. A PRIEST kneels near her head, administering last rites. LA FORET sits on a chair; a bowl of water in her lap, dabbing her eyes with a towel. MOLIERE appears in the doorway. LA FORET rises, looks at him and crosses herself.

MOLIERE

(Deeply disturbed) La Foret? (*Beat*)...Gone?... (*LA FORET nods; MOLIERE crosses himself.*) Mon Dieu! (*Beat*) ... Armande...?

LA FORET

She was here until . . .

LA FORET and MOLIERE both observe the PRIEST who is returning a vial of holy oil into a leather bag. HE lifts the bed-cover up to conceal Madeleine's face then rises, turning to MOLIERE.

PRIEST

I am Father Codelet. I am so sorry, Monsieur. (*HE waits for a response that does not come.*) Fortunately, I was called in time. I anointed the lady with holy oil and she has gone to her maker. May his eternal grace embrace her.

MOLIERE nods then crosses around the bed to examine a document on the bed stand.

MOLIERE

(Astonished) And you had her sign this!

LA FORET

She signed of her own free will.

MOLIERE

(Reading) “I, Madeleine Bejart, do hereby renounce and repent of my profession as actress, that I may enter the mysteries of faith and find peace in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

MOLIERE, visibly upset, drops the document.

MOLIERE

Madeleine renounced her profession! She confessed to being a sinner! La Foret!

LA FORET

She wanted to sign it, Monsieur.

PRIEST

(Softly) Aren't we all sinners, Monsieur?

MOLIERE

(Pacing angrily) Yes, all! And no one more than another! Acting is no more sinful than keeping store or mending pots or ruling France! And no papal bull is going to change that fact!

PRIEST

Careful, Monsieur. You should be grateful that Mademoiselle Bejart chose—of her own free will—to seek the forgiveness of sins. Her decision honors her as she has honored the Lord Jesus by it.

Uncomfortable speaking so near to the deceased, the PRIEST motions toward the doorway.

PRIEST

May we talk privately?

MOLIERE

(Ignoring this) Understand this, Vicar. The Church and the Theatre are in the same business. They have similar goals but use different methods. The Church tries to scare sinners into repentance; theatre tries to shame them into it. The Church uses fear as its primary instrument; the theatre, laughter and ridicule.

PRIEST

(Scandalized) A common goal, Monsieur?

HE brushes by MOLIERE to leave; stops at the doorway, and turns.

PRIEST, *Continues*

That, Monsieur, is blasphemy!

LA FORET

(Alarmed at this) Oh, Father...Father!

The PRIEST exits with LA FORET chasing after calling "Wait, Father!" MOLIERE makes the sign of the cross once again. HE goes to MADELEINE and gently pulls the bed cover away from her face. HE makes the sign of the cross over her chest, then kneels beside her, taking her lifeless hand and kissing it.

MOLIERE

(Painfully) Dear, dear Madeleine. I should have been here. *(Beat)* There was a time when I loved you ... *(Sobbing)*...more than life itself.

MOLIERE rises, seizing the signed document. HE looks at it one more time then crumples it, tossing it into a corner of the room. HE drops into the chair. LA FORET enters quite disturbed.

LA FORET?

Oh Monsieur, you shouldn't have offended the priest.

MOLIERE

He's an ass. But life goes on, La Foret. Find that priest and arrange for her burial. *(Beat)* With Madeleine gone, Du Park at the Borgoyne, and Armande...uncertain...we are short on the female side. Must find another actress, La Foret. *(Grabbing his coat, HE starts out, stops, and turns back.)* You have enough work to do?

LA FORET

(Dryly) I have enough to keep me busy.

MOLIERE exits. LA FORET leans over MADELEINE, kisses her cheek, then pulls the cover over her face. BLACKOUT followed by TRANSITIONAL MUSIC.

ACT II; SCENE TWO

AT RISE: Moliere's sitting room. BARON half-shoves ARMANDE into the room as THEY argue.

ARMANDE

No, Baron! I will not stay with Jean. Why did you bring me here?

BARON

It is important! He's grieving for Madeleine, but you know that he still loves you!

ARMANDE

He will never forgive me for moving out!

BARON

He has already forgotten.

ARMANDE

He takes me for granted. He hardly knows when I'm here, so immersed in his scenes and plays. He is obsessed with work. He dislikes my friends. And he calls every purchase I make an extravagance. No, Michel! He cannot supply what I need!

BARON

He needs what you can supply.

ARMANDE

Why do you insist I return to him? Don't you understand, Michel? My heart is yours.

BARON

Of course, ma petite. You know how much I—

ARMANDE

You charmed me when his back was turned—

BARON

My lovely Armande, my dear little flirt—

ARMANDE

Why should I stay with him when I love you? (*Beat. BARON sighs and turns away.*) Oh! I see! Rejected? You're discarding me like a pair of worn-out boots! (*Incensed*) You two-faced worm! You wretched philanderer!

BARON

(*Attempting to pacify her.*) My sweet, my dearest—

ARMANDE

Stop it! Don't you belittle me!

SHE tries to slap him and misses. SHE tries again but HE grabs her arm. SHE pulls away and runs by him but HE follows and holds her.

BARON

Wait! I love you, ma petite.

ARMANDE

Oh! (*Tries to pull away but HE restrains her.*) You, you—

BARON

No, I could never love anyone more.

ARMANDE

Is that just nonsense—a pack of lies or—

BARON & ARMANDE

(*Together*) The truth!

ARMANDE

Then... why?

BARON

(*Beat*) Right now, with the Master, it is not a question of love, but of need.

ARMANDE

Need? (*Pacing*) Then I should run through the streets screaming, "Who needs me? Who needs me the most?" and go to bed with some ugly hod-carrier! Well... (*Beat*) If he needs me I don't need him!

BARON

(Crossing to her) No, but do you owe him something? How did you become an actress, Armande? Did he not train you? Spend hours coaching you on lines, stage business, interpretation? Ma petite, our time is coming, but now he is lonely, depressed—

ARMANDE

Yes. *(Beat)* Madeleine...

BARON

And the loss of Racine with his plays. Theresa has gone, raging, to the Bourgogne. And there is the new quarrel with Monsieur Lully. The composer has—

ARMANDE

Trashed the arrangement with Jean. And Jean's recent work cannot be performed at Versailles. You talk as if I were ignorant of all this.

BARON

I am just trying to make you understand.

ARMANDE

Oh! I don't understand anything! So you agree with the "Master" that I am just a brainless female!

BARON

No, my love, no! But—you know how sick he is!

ARMANDE

Then why does he keep turning away those doctors Boileau finds for him?

BARON

You know he distrusts physicians. *(Noises)* Someone is coming!

ARMANDE tries to pull away. Again, BARON holds her by the wrist.

BARON

Remember, ma petite, I love you.

ARMANDE

(Sardonically) It is not a question of love, but of need!

*BARON and ARMANDE exit hastily.
BLACKOUT.*

ACT II; SCENE THREE

AT RISE: MUSIC transitions us to a new scene in Moliere's sitting room. LIGHTS RISE on MOLIERE, BOILEAU, AND LA GRANGE once again trying to deal with problems with the Church.

BOILEAU

But Jean, you covered yourself in "Don Juan" by making his comic servant Sganarelle a defender of the faith. Your portrayal of Sganarelle was brilliant. And in the end his master, the wicked atheist and seducer Don Juan drops straight into the pit of hell.

From a standing position upstage, LA GRANGE lowers his body impishly, as if descending into Hell, drawing a laugh from the audience.

BOILEAU, *Continues*

That ending should satisfy even the ultra-pious!

MOLIERE

(To BOILEAU) Apparently the bishops disagree! They say that by making Sganarelle such a fool I'm mocking the faith again, by showing how the shallowness of the faithful compromises the mission of the church. *(MOLIERE'S companions scowl and shake their heads in disgust.)* I'm withdrawing "Don Juan", gentlemen. That's my final decision.

BOILEAU

You're not serious!

MOLIERE

I am.

LA GRANGE

But we've made more money on "Don Juan" than on any play since arriving in Paris. And we're sold out for a week!

BOILEAU

The reason is that your Sganarelle is absolutely brilliant!

MOLIERE

I waited five years to get "Tartuffe" approved, gentlemen. I'm not going to give them the satisfaction of banning "Don Juan".

There is a LOUD TAPPING SOUND coming from without. THEY look towards the sound to see MONTFLEURY, an ornate cane in one hand, standing in the doorway. THERESA DU PARC is with him. THEY are dressed “to the nines.”

MONTFLEURY

Good day gentlemen, I wish you all well— And may the saints preserve you from hell.

MOLIERE

Well, well, Monsieur Montfleury again. And Mademoiselle du Parc. What an unexpected surprise!

MONTFLEURY

The Marquise felt the need for a breath of fresh air; I persuaded her to come visit—

DU PARC

Moliere!

DU PARC seems more “refined” since last seen. As evidence of her more exalted position in society, SHE tries to use rhyming verse for everyday speech. SHE will hesitate at times, comically groping for the right words— But she is proud of her new “talent” and MONTFLEURY is quite impressed with her.

DU PARC

(To MOLIERE)

Bon jour, monsieur, I trust you are healthy;
I happen to know you’ve become quite wealthy,
Although I find in your plays’ designs
Nothing but clumsy and vulgar lines.

(Parading about)

I must say to you, Monsieur Moliere
The circumstances of my departure were quite unfair.

(Beat)

Now—your little Armande has been a hit,
But your hasty marriage—what to make of it?

SHE commands the room. The OTHERS stifle snickers and poke each other in amusement.

DU PARC, *Continued*

But you should know that I bear no grudge,
And from the Bourgogne I shall never—budge—
No matter what your entreaties to return.
I would refuse them all—I'd rather burn.
I must concede—indeed—you did me quite a favor!
Jean's Racine's lines have a more distinguished—flavor!

MOLIERE

(Dryly) I'm so glad you've found a perfect savior. We, I must say, have managed well without you. *(His COLLEAGUES chuckle.)*

DU PARC

I've been given roles to match my talents. We do professional work. None of your dunces, dances, or dumb shows in our theatre.

MOLIERE

What? You do speak prose as well?

LA FORET enters carrying a feather duster. DU PARC directs her next words to her.

DU PARC

Prose is the common tongue, and I regret any accidental reversion;
But it takes time to make the complete conversion.

MONTFLEURY

The lady has made great strides during the time she's spent with us. Monsieur Racine has made her his personal protégé.

LA FOREST

I think it's delightful the Marquise is learning verse. By the time she's dead she'll be spouting enough hexameter to astonish both the undertaker and his gravediggers!

DU PARC

I beg your pardon!

LA FORET

Forgive me, mademoiselle. Sometimes I cannot help waxing eloquent myself.

DU PARC

The only thing you can wax is a kitchen floor!

LA FORET bristles at this.

LA GRANGE

Tsk, tsk! More prose!

LA GRANGE forcibly escorts LA FORET upstage. DU PARC sniffs disdainfully and glares at LA FORET who curtsies with a silly smirk and exits. DU PARK continues to “show off.”

DU PARC

As pious people sometimes sin, God knows,
I will occasionally lapse into prose.
But I am learning to deliver lines—
On stage and off—in more and more rhymes.
An actress, my dear unlettered souls,
Must practice her craft in grassy knolls,
Courtyards, rustic inns, on cobblestone streets,
Wherever ears may hear her rhythmic treats.
I am serious, and a true professional;
No guilty conscience carried to confessional.
Instead...instead...that is, instead—

MONTFLEURY

She remains in character from breakfast to bed.

BOILEAU

Nice catch, Montfleury. But I suspect she assumes an undercover role after dark. Racine, Marquise?

DU PARC

(Pretends to take offense.) How dare you, sir? Jean Racine and I are merely—friends.

BOILEAU

I wonder how far that friendship extends.

DU PARC becomes incensed.

MOLIERE

Nicolas, please. These are my guests, and I am sure they have come with the best of intentions.

HE BEGINS to cough intermittently.

MONTFLEURY

I—we, that is—came to inquire about your health, monsieur, and to offer my company’s services. We heard that you were not well, as it were—

MOLIERE

No, I am in excellent health.

MONTFLEURY

And we can supply an actor to replace you.

MOLIERE

Very kind indeed. (*Coughs*) We shall manage.

MONTFLEURY

I shall pray that your excellent health...improves. By the way, gentlemen, the conclusion to your “Don Juan” is deplorable. Yes, you destroy the wicked man and down he does to hell—but it’s all done with unrepentant defiance. We don’t see the desperate sinner agonizing as the Grim Reaper wraps him in its icy talons. It must be highly dramatic; it must be elevated to the level of art. (*HE takes MOLIERE to a seat.*) Permit me a little demonstration, as it were.

MONTFLEURY crosses to center and proceeds to demonstrate “how to die” properly; histrionically overplaying it. BOILEAU AND LA GRANGE mimic him just out of his sight range. Drawing his demonstration out, with some flare, HE continues to instruct MOLIERE.

MONTFLEURY, *Continues*

The actor must succumb in stages, so...and so...until gasping and shuddering...he collapses quite properly...so...and so!

HE collapses over-dramatically to the floor in front of MOLIERE. The OTHERS applaud.

MONTFLEURY, *Continues*

Now, sir, *that* is the proper way to...go to Hell!

MOLIERE

I have always depended on monsieur’s example in such matters.

MONTFLEURY

(*Rising and dusting himself off.*) At any rate, monsieur, I have warned you against making enemies. “Don Juan” will increase their number, as it were. If I were you I would withdraw it!

MOLIERE

Withdraw it? And waste the chance to emulate your splendid performance? No, no—we’re extending it by popular demand—doubling the showings!

LA GRANGE

(Surprised) We are?

BOILEAU

You are?

MOLIERE

Indeed we are!

MONTFLEURY

I am sorry to hear it. *(Beat)* Speaking of enemies...

MOLIERE

Were we?

MONTFLEURY

We have just returned from Versailles, where I myself have had some very private conversations with his majesty, as it were. It seems, Monsieur, that someone close to you—

*LA GRANGE quickly interrupts to shield
MOLIERE from hearing about
ARMANDE and King Louis*

LA GRANGE

You know him well, then—the king?

MONTFLEURY

Sir, I am on most intimate terms with his royal highness. Monsieur Moliere, I regret that I must inform you—

BOILEAU

(Likewise attempting to distract MONTFLEURY) But have you attended the king's rising at dawn, the lever? *(Pronounced "Lev'-ay")*

MONTFLEURY

(Proudly) Naturally. The performance of his majesty's toilette is a privilege only his most intimate admirers are allowed to witness. Which brings me to—

BOILEAU

(Inspired) Do you hear, Jean? Monsieur Montfleury is the perfect collaborator for your new piece!

MOLIERE

(Surprised) He is?

MONTFLEURY

(Curious) What piece?

BOILEAU

(Making it up) Monsieur, we have been commissioned to write a new play, a tribute to the King's lever!

DU PARC

(Aghast) What?

MONTFLEURY

The lever! Surely you jest!

BOILEAU

Not at all. The king enjoys Moliere's pageants.

MONTFLEURY

(Shocked) You've only mocked his courtiers—but to portray the king himself!

DU PARC

That would be monstrous!

BOILEAU

No, no. I assure you it is with his majesty's imprimatur.

MONTFLEURY

It is?

MOLIERE

(Joining in the fun) In fact, his majesty himself suggested you to play his royal highness.

MONTFLEURY

He did?

MOLIERE

Indeed. He said you alone had the—the—how did he put it—the spiritual capacity to bring his character to life, as it were.

MONTFLEURY

I am most honored, sir, to play the leading role in a tribute to our king.

MOLIERE

The honor is all ours. *(Calls)* La Foret!

LA FORET enters. BOILEAU whispers something to her and then to LA GRANGE. THEY arrange a divan or settee centrally, or place two chairs together to form a "bed".

LA GRANGE

Now, if you will just recline here, monsieur...and pretend you're asleep.

MONTFLEURY

None of your tricks and foolishness now! I will not allow this to descend into one of your grotesque parodies, Moliere. This will be in the spirit of reverent tribute or not at all!

MOLIERE

Have no doubt, monsieur, we will maintain it in the spirit in which it is intended.

BOILEAU

(*To DU PARC*) Now Marquise, we need your talent as well.

DU PARC

Really?

BOILEAU

Absolutely! Now you play his royal...his royal... (*Noticing LA FORET*) ...his chamber-maid.

DU PARC

What? I should play a maid?!

LA GRANGE

The king suggested it, did he not?

MOILERE

Of course, of course—how could I have forgotten? His majesty is so impressed with your comic talent!

DU PARC

(*Considering*) Oh, in that case...(Shrugs)

LA GRANGE

Our drama begins!

With DU PARC on board, LA GRANGE “directs” the lever scene, a parody based on events that transpired daily at Versailles. BOILEAU AND LA FORET play most of the business with MOLIERE’s help, while LA GRANGE narrates. The MARQUISE is secretly amused by all this, but works at concealing her pleasure.

LA GRANGE, *Continued*

The first Valet du Chambre enters, and attends his majesty. The royal faggot-bearers light the royal fire. The watchmaker winds the royal watch. The wigmaker enters by the side door, bringing his majesty's short wig, the one he wears while he's dressing. The clock strikes eight, and the first Valet du Chambre awakens the king. (*BOILEAU claps his hands by MONTFLEURY'S ears, startling him.*) Not so indecorously, Nicolas. The exciting news that his majesty is awake spreads through the densely-packed ante-room, setting the courtiers rustling like a field of corn in a summer breeze.

BOILEAU

Splendid simile, Charles.

LA GRANGE

Thank you, Nicolas.

THE actors run about the perimeter of the room whispering, "He's awake! He's awake!" Then louder, in chorus, dragging MOLIERE and DU PARC into a little dance. THEY become increasingly boisterous. MONTFLEURY is astounded and rises from his "bed" to confront them.

MONTFLEURY

Cease and desist! This isn't one of your bawdy comedies, gentlemen! I insist you maintain an attitude of reverence. Otherwise... (*Begins to walk away*)

BOILEAU

Monsieur, please don't leave us. We're just arriving at the climax.

LA GRANGE

A superior actor like yourself— surely you can inspire us with the proper attitude.

MONTFLEURY

Well... (*Beat*) Proceed. (*Resuming his place as King*)

LA GRANGE

Meanwhile, two physicians inquire about his majesty's health, rub him down, and change his shirt. (*MONTFLEURY will not permit this!*) The king recites the office of the Holy Ghost...

MONTFLEURY crosses himself and puts his hands together reverentially. HE begins to chant as HE steps forward.

MONTFLEURY

Veni, sante spiritus, reple tuorum—

LA GRANGE

(Cutting him off)...and the swarm of nobles passes through the main doors to watch his majesty dress. His garments are passed along from the first valet to the senior person present, as the courtiers whisper to one another... *(To BOILEAU)* How clever!

BOILEAU

How graceful he is!

MOLIERE

Look at him deftly dressing himself.

DU PARC

How majestic he appears!

LA GRANGE notices LA FORET crossing upstage with a chamber-pot or bedpan in hand. HE grabs it from her, along with a dirty cloth SHE carries and SHE exits.

LA GRANGE

He is given a bowl so that he might wash his face and hands. Not, of course, in water—

BOILEAU

For that would be unhealthy—

LA GRANGE

But with scented cotton that has been soaked in alcohol.

LA GRANGE gives MONTFLEURY the Chamber-pot. HE makes a face and hands it to BOILEAU who slyly sets it on a chair.

LA GRANGE

Having washed, he dries his own face... *(LA GRANGE ceremoniously hands the soiled cloth to MONTFLEURY who sniffs it disgustedly, handing it to MOLIERE who tosses it aside.)* ...without any assistance from his entourage. Isn't that perfectly marvelous? *(The ACTORS ad lib approval.)*

LA GRANGE and BOILEAU Take MONTFLEURY by the arms and set him on the chamber pot on the chair facing the audience as THEY intone the final words.

LA GRANGE, *Continued*

And that—

BOILEAU

Completes—

LA GRANGE

The lever!

BOILEAU

Voila!

BOILEAU gestures grandly towards the gulled MONTFLEURY which is followed by Applause and guffaws from all but DU PARC. MONTFLEURY struggles to control his rage. HE rises, feels his behind, sniffs his hands, makes a face, and stomps his foot.

MONTFLEURY

(Curtly) You missed a good many details, gentlemen! Furthermore, you have made a mockery of the lever, not a tribute! *(Beat)* The King hasn't commissioned this! I should have known that all this was trumped up to scorn me and ridicule his majesty!

DU PARC

If King Louis should hear of this indecent travesty—

MONTFLEURY

Yes, this irreverent sham—this parody of his most intimate—

LA GRANGE

If the King should hear, he will also discover that a certain Monsieur Montfleury participated—in fact, played the leading role, I must add, monsieur.

MONTFLEURY

(Sinking in) Touché. *(Taking the MEN aside.)* Keep it under your hats, gentlemen. I implore you. Let us forget the entire incident.

LA GRANGE

As you wish—your highness. *(Bows. MONTFLEURY recoils.)*

MONTFLEURY

(To DU PARC) Marquise, I believe it is time to leave this undistinguished company.

DU PARC

Yes. Good day, monsieurs. This—improvisation—
Was quite unsuited to my present—ah-

MONTFLEURY

Station!

DU PARC

Yes. And let the record show for me
That I took part in it unwillingly.

*Resuming their mockery— MOLIERE
and LA GRANGE rush to DU PARC and
kneel before her.*

MOLIERE

You could rejoin our troupe, Marquise.

LA GRANGE

We'll take you back on bended knee!

DU PARC

(Turning disgustedly)

I would no sooner join this company
Than throw myself into the sea—
With your penchant for insipid farce and...and...

*Now boiling with rage, SHE breaks into
prose.*

DU PARC, *Continues*

...horrendous satire and...your wife's unsavory reputation as a result of her amours which are
the talk of Paris at this very moment, as you must know, Monsieur, if you have ears to hear—

MOLIERE

(Irate) What? Now you've gone too far, Marquise—

MONTFLEURY

Come, my dear, perhaps—this is not the time—

*MONTFLEURY attempts to turn her and
usher her out, but DU PARC pulls away
and confronts MOLIERE to his face.*

DU PARC

Laugh at this, monsieur, you'll laugh at anything— *(Beat)* —The God of Laughter's been cuckolded by the King!

Note: If there is doubt that the audience will understand "cuckold" the line may be changed to "The God of Laughter's wife slept with the King."

EVERYONE is stunned as this comes as news to MOLIERE. There is a long moment as the bombshell explodes. Then, grabbing her arm, MONTFLEURY steers DU PARC quickly towards the door and THEY exit. MOLIERE laughs or coughs nervously, first turning away then back, staring at BOILEAU and LA GRANGE, who avert their eyes. MOLIERE crosses to BOILEAU.

MOLIERE

Nicolas?

BOILEAU is silent. HE looks at MOLIERE, and drops his head sadly. MOLIERE, having received his answer, spins and exits quickly. BOILEAU and LA GRANGE exchange looks of concern as the LIGHTS FADE OUT.

ACT II; SCENE FOUR

AT RISE: MUSIC transitions us to ARMANDE's chamber. SHE is sitting at her vanity, touching up her face in the mirror. BARON sneaks up behind her, holding a bouquet of flowers.

ARMANDE

(Spotting him in the mirror) What do you think, Michel? Are my eyebrows too dark? I could pull them out.

BARON

(Kissing her neck) Do you want to look like a plucked chicken? I like you just the way you are! *(Handing her the flowers)* Here, ma petite.

ARMANDE

(Taking them) Lovely.

BARON

Will you come to my place tonight, Armande?

ARMANDE

Is your blood running hot again, Michel?

BARON

I want you. You have no idea how much.

ARMANDE throws the flowers on the vanity.

ARMANDE

You're so fickle, Michel! First you want me, then you don't—and now you want me again. Why did you urge me to return to Jean?

BARON

I was trying to protect you—protect us! For God's sake, you're his wife, I'm his student. He was destroyed by Madeleine's death. Your sister meant the world to him. And the ugly business with "Tartuffe". Fighting the King, the Church. He seemed desolate, inconsolable. I couldn't take advantage...But he's stronger now, and he's written another comic hit. Not that everyone recognizes his genius... *(Taking her mirror and miming)* You know what they say in the salons? Moliere sneaks in to see Scaramouche perform his farces, and with a mirror held up to his face, the Master imitates the Italian. He examines himself in the mirror to see if he's copied that clown's grimaces perfectly.

ARMANDE

That's all nonsense. Scaramouche should study Moliere.

BARON

Agreed. But here—examine my face, ma petite. What do you see?

ARMANDE

Lust.

BARON

No, no! Love, my dear one. I would do anything for you give anything, buy anything, sell anything. I would die for you if it came to that.

ARMANDE

No lust?

BARON

Well...maybe a little.

ARMANDE

(Brusquely) You practically threw me at him. He needed me more, you said. Maybe you were alarmed that he would write me out of his will if I didn't play the good and proper wife.

BARON

But you did leave him. Now you show up for rehearsals, he runs your scenes, then you vanish. It's the same with performances.

ARMANDE

He has left me a generous sum in his will.

BARON

Ah...but is that proof of his love?

ARMANDE

No, but—he's been very generous. He writes parts for me in every play. Excellent roles!

BARON

He likes your style. You're a talented actress. But as a wife—well, you're young and gorgeous and he likes showing you off at court, and at the best cafes. But what do you have in common besides theatre?

ARMANDE

I know, Michel. We're different in so many ways. I like nice things and we quarrel about my spending. And when I manage to drag him into bed he's such a buffoon.

BARON

You don't love him.

ARMANDE

He loves me, in his own peculiar way, and whether I can return his love is beside the point. *(SHE pauses, then confronts him, taking him by the wrists)* Don't you see? We're both indebted to him. He's given us both a chance to do what we enjoy most—to perform in front of a grateful audience—to bathe in their laughter and approval. Without Jean— *(Beat)* Well, you were right when you said that Jean is too much the center of our lives for us to act as if our feelings mattered more.

BARON

Will you return to him?

ARMANDE shrugs, steps to the vanity and picks up the flowers. Beat.

ARMANDE

Maybe I like it on my own.

BARON

What would you have me do?

ARMANDE crosses to him and hands him the bouquet.

ARMANDE

Be patient. Our time will come. Play the longsuffering lover.

BARON

(Sighs) It is a role I'm ill-suited for.

BARON idly tosses the bouquet, scattering the flowers just as MOLIERE appears in the doorway. When THEY see him, THEY break apart, startled.

MOLIERE

Planting a garden, Michel?

BARON

I—I was just leaving, Master.

MOLIERE

Once I criticized you for making awkward entrances. Your exits are poorly timed as well.

BARON

I shall improve them, Master.

BARON exits quickly. MOLIERE turns to stare at ARMANDE who gamely manages a smile.

ARMANDE

Doesn't a gentleman knock before entering a lady's chamber?

MOLIERE

(Coldly) If she happens to be a lady.

ARMANDE

(Puzzled) And what does that mean?

MOLIERE

I think you know.

ARMANDE

(Exasperated) What do you want, Jean? A confession?

MOLIERE

(Iratel) Yes, dammit. That would do nicely, thank you.

ARMANDE

It's all very obvious, no? How can I deny that I've been with him, and that we feel something for each other?

MOLIERE

And...?

ARMANDE

What do you mean by "and"?

MOLIERE

You know what I mean by "and"!

ARMANDE

Jean, I do love you but...as we've said in so many ways...we're not really compatible. With Baron, someone of my own age...

MOLIERE

Baron?

ARMANDE

Believe me when I tell you—we have not slept together.

MOLIERE

(Kicking some flowers) I am not interested in discussing Baron!

ARMANDE

What? *(Confused, and then in dawns on her what he means.)* Oh!

MOLIERE

You and Louis! My Armande and the Sun King of France! *(HE stomps about, angrily kicking the flowers.)* Can you deny it? Was it for pleasure, or for the prestige? *(In her face)* Armande—bedding a king doesn't make you royalty! It makes you a high class whore with silk stockings but still nothing but a whore! *(Beat)* Did you forget that you belonged to someone else?

ARMANDE

I may be married, but I *belong* to no man.

MOLIERE

Louis, my patron, and—so I thought—my friend. Why? And you, why? Of course, they say that is what every French girl wants in her heart. Is that so? Was it for fun, or done for posterity? A conquest, a trophy for your book of memories? Something to tell your nonexistent grandchildren, that you warmed a monarch's bed? Well?

ARMANDE

(*Dully*) Kings command...and we obey.

MOLIERE

Is that all you can say?

ARMANDE

(*Sharply*) Have you forgotten, my dear Jean, that your masterpiece, your beloved “Tartuffe”, was in great jeopardy when Nicolas and I gained an audience with his majesty?

MOLIERE

What?

ARMANDE

The king was unimpressed with the arguments we made on your behalf and—to save your play—well—perhaps a bargain could be made. (*Beat*) I thought we had an arrangement.

MOLIERE

A bargain? Do you think that a monarch who could have any woman he wants save the Virgin Mary would make such a bargain? The King could cuckold every man in this company and not feel an ounce of obligation.

ARMANDE

Perhaps.

MOLIERE

What made you think you could save my play! (*Pacing, raving*) I know how to work the King! I’ve been playing his games since before you left the convent. Like any monarch, he likes flattery. The only question was how much fawning I could do without ruining the play. That’s why it took so much editing, so many drafts. And it was my final draft that saved “Tartuffe”. I stuffed that last speech with enough encomiums to make Louis sound like Charlemagne, Aristotle, and St. Francis rolled into one. Believe me, I sacrificed my integrity to get that play performed.

ARMANDE

So did I.

MOLIERE

There’s no comparison.

ARMANDE

I’m not the genius you are, Jean-Baptiste. I can’t write the words that “sear men’s souls.” I’m a good actress, and I dress a stage well, and people find me attractive. That’s my talent, Jean, the face and figure to attract notice, even to catch a king’s eye. That’s all I had to offer. You’ll believe what you want, but I knew that your beloved play was in trouble, and you were sinking with it. I did what I had to do.

MOLIERE

What? Do you expect me to believe this was a virtuous act—giving yourself that “Tartuffe” might live?

ARMANDE

(Wearily) I expect nothing. I hoped you would understand. The ban was lifted.

MOLIERE

If I had known, do you think I would have approved? Even for “Tartuffe”?

ARMANDE

“Tartuffe” was your obsession, not only your work, but life itself to you. “Tartuffe” was your mother, your lover, your constant companion for months. When I awoke you were already at your desk with “Tartuffe”. When I retired it was already in bed with you. When—

MOLIERE

I had to make it right! I had to give it life! *(Coughs, sighs, and drops into a chair)* You never will understand!

ARMANDE

(Sadly) You’re right, Jean. I never will.

ARMANDE comes up behind MOLIERE and starts to lay her hands on his shoulders. SHE thinks better of it, turns and walks out. MOLIERE slumps in his chair, angry and exhausted. BLACKOUT.

ACT II; SCENE FIVE

AT RISE: MUSIC transitions us back to Moliere’s chamber. It is early morning. MOLIERE lies in bed, barely awake, in the grip of depression. HE occasionally coughs due to his advancing tuberculosis. LA FORET, feather duster in hand, opens the shutters (or curtains). A BIRD-SONG is heard.

LA FORET

There is a lark singing, master. Outside the window.

MOLIERE

(Dolefully) No, it’s a mockingbird.

LA FORET

Morose as usual, are we? Still the melancholy mood?

MOLIERE

I'm giving you notice, La Foret. I'm sorry.

LA FORET

I'm giving you notice, monsieur! (*Dusting*) You've been moping around here for six weeks. Sleeping very little, eating and drinking less. (*SHE dusts him as HE lays in bed.*) Meanwhile the company's coming apart. Actors want their lines, their roles. Your empty theatre goes begging for a play. Every day the king's agent comes asking, "What's happened to Moliere?" What do I tell this man when he comes tomorrow?

MOLIERE

(*Rising to a sitting position*) I cannot go on. I am through. Fed up with this world of vain and selfish people. You sweat and slave, and they cheat you in a minute. You work your fingers to the bare bones to provide a wage for others, and they betray you. They speak well of you to your face and stab you once your back is turned. There is no sincerity in humanity, no kindness, no real loyalty or integrity. Only guile, deception, cunning, and despicable deceit.

LA FORET

But six weeks of this! I'm giving you notice, monsieur!

MOLIERE

Dear Madeleine left me, my first love, my inspiration...and then Armande turned away...My friends and colleagues betrayed me with their silence. And my king—even my patron became my adversary. Everyone whose faults I've exposed has attacked my art and said vile things about me. I'm through, La Foret. I shall renounce all human contact and live in solitary confinement for the rest of my life.

LA FORET

You're going to become a monk?

MOLIERE

No, a hermit. Monks are too religious.

LA FORET

But your gifts, monsieur! What shall become of the Paris stage without your gifts?

MOLIERE

I am through with the stage. (*Rising*) The stage mirrors life: all is pretense. I shall never write again.

LA FORET

Well, well. I think I know how to turn a phrase myself. We'll exchange places. (*Hands him her feather-duster*) I'll do the writing and you dust the furniture!

MOLIERE

What?

LA FORET

(Crossing to Moliere's desk) I'll give you a chance to edit a few lines. *(Sits at his desk, takes his pen)*

MOLIERE

(Riled) I'll give you a chance to leave here without a beating.

LA FORET

If you prove yourself with that duster, I'll teach you how to clean the shutters.

MOLIERE

I don't need this! *(HE crosses to her and whacks her with the duster.)* I'm a broken man, I have no will left, no *raison d'être*—and you, La Foret, you dare to scorn me and ridicule my feelings?

LA FORET

(Teasing him out) You're too good for us, eh? Much too decent for this world?

MOLIERE

Did I say that?

LA FORET

Mm-hmm. *(Begins writing)* "I am the only man of integrity in the whole city of Paris. Yet I sit, dishonored, distained, disowned by those I sought to help."

MOLIERE

It's time someone exposed the hypocrisy and perversity that goes on in the name of civilization.

LA FORET

That's very good! *(Writing, with a flourish)* "I am the critic of the age. I shall expose the perversity, plundering and philandering—"

MOLIERE

It's no use, La Foret! There is no one in the kingdom besides myself who is genuine, honest, and sincere...

LA FORET

...including the King...

MOLIERE

...including the King!

LA FORET

But one can go too far. (*Restores pen into holder*) Surely one cannot always be truthful. (*Rising, SHE confronts him.*) Suppose I were to tell you that you have no talent for dusting, or that your housekeeping is terrible!

MOLIERE

And suppose you came to me with some verse and I critiqued it harshly!

LA FORET

(*Grabbing the duster*) I would be wounded! (*Beating him with the duster*) That is the way—to lose—friends!

MOLIERE

(*Dodging her whacks*) And suppose I don't care, what's important to me is being totally honest, whatever the risk to reputation or relationship.

LA FORET

Such a man would be ostracized.

MOLIERE

(*Slowly the creative light dawns*) Such a man—such a man—such a misanthropic man—would exile himself! He would leave the vain, corrupt society in which he lives and find another—a place to live where there is no human contact—

LA FORET

Even if the young lady he adores who—who—

MOLIERE

Who exhibits the characteristics he abhors—

LA FORET

...is fickle, extravagant, vain—

MOLIERE

Altogether a prig and a pain—wait! Why would our misanthrope like this woman? It wouldn't be consistent with his nature!

LA FORET

There's no accounting for love, monsieur.

MOLIERE

That's the chink in his armor, his inconsistent infatuation for this—this silly femme fatale!

LA FORET

I think you've got it! This virtuous man who wears integrity like a suit of clothes loves a totally selfish woman because—well, because...

MOLIERE AND LA FORET

There's no accounting for love!

MOLIERE

We have a play writing itself! (*Rushes to his desk*) Where's my paper?

LA FORET

On your desk, of course.

MOLIERE

Good, good. (*Coughs*) I wish I could get rid of this cough.

LA FORET

The doctors say—

MOLIERE

The inkwell's run dry. More ink, and be quick about it!

LA FORET poses dramatically by Moliere's desk and drops the feather duster to the floor.

LA FORET

You've given me notice, monsieur.

MOLIERE

The only thing I notice is that the inkwell's dry! So why are you standing there, you idle housekeeper? I don't pay you for doing nothing.

LA FORET

You don't pay me enough for what I do, monsieur.

MOLIERE looks up, grins, and kisses her hand. SHE smiles with a wink at the audience, turns and briskly exits as the LIGHTS FADE OUT.

ACT II; SCENE SIX

AT RISE: Once again, MUSIC transitions the scene change to Moliere's sitting room. MOLIERE is coaching BARON as THEY work on a scene from "The Misanthrope".

MOLIERE

No, no, no! We're in the fifth act, the climax to the whole story, and you're not getting it! Again, Baron: what sort of a man is Alceste?

BARON

(Tired of being drilled on this) Incorruptible, forthright, driven by his disgust at anything phony or superficial. The apostle of candor—

MOLIERE

Not just an apostle, Baron—he's a fanatic about it. He's excessively critical of others' faults. He abhors hypocrisy but he himself is a hypocrite in that he loves Celimene. Unfortunately you're not getting into the character—you don't understand this paradox in Alceste—don't you see—

MOLIERE breaks into a coughing fit.

BARON

Are you well, master?

MOLIERE

I'm fine!

BARON

Then why are you pushing me so hard?

MOLIERE

What? Just a little coaching—

BARON

Coaching! Nothing I do or say is right! It's the same with every role, every rehearsal lately. You just keep on hammering!

MOLIERE

The artist uses hammer and chisel on the finest marble. I see the potential in you, Baron. I wouldn't work you so hard if I didn't expect you to become the best actor in Paris.

BARON

Maybe you expect too much. Not that I'm ungrateful. You've been a father to me in so many ways—

MOLIERE

And you've been like a son. *(Beat)* ...or son-in-law.

BARON

(Beat) Oh, so it's about Armande.

MOLIERE

It's not about you and Armande. Now continue!

BARON

What did you mean by son-in-law?

MOLIERE

Well, if we weren't married...that is, given a different set of circumstances...At any rate, father-in-law sounds better than cuckold!

BARON

I assure you we've never been—

MOLIERE

That's nothing to me. I believe you.

BARON

I swear on my honor we've never gone beyond just—

MOLIERE

I said I believe you! (*Examines him*) Why don't we take the scene from another angle? What sort of person is Celimene?

BARON

(*Sighs*) She's the High Priestess of Insincerity. She's twenty, superficial, fickle to a fault, a professional gossip who praises people to their faces and ridicules everyone behind their backs. Totally selfish. But Alceste is blind to her faults although she embodies everything he hates—

MOLIERE

No, no! He's a perceptive man—and it's not that he's blind or that love is blind. He says—and truly believes—that his deep love for this woman will purge her of the follies of the age. And this—infatuation—with Celimene—drives him into a jealous rage whenever she's with other men, whether she's flirting or not, which she is, for the most part, since his love is not returned in full.

BARON

Have you ever been jealous, master?

MOLIERE

(*Sharply*) This is not about us, Baron! (*Beat*) How does Celimene regard Alceste?

BARON

She's amused by his eccentricities, master.

MOLIERE

And sometimes enraged by them. Come, try the speech again.

BARON

I'm not right for Alceste. Someone else—

MOLIERE

No! You look like Alceste and you sound like Alceste and you have the talent. You've proven that by now. Your Valere was the talk of Paris.

BARON

(Pleased, taking the script again) I'll try the lines again.

MOLIERE

Don't just read the lines, become the character! Now in Act V, remember, these gentlemen have been reporting on letters they've received from Celimene. She's been professing her love for each while skewering their rival suitors in very insulting, demeaning terms. You're outraged, Baron. You've been silent in this scene, holding it all in, and now you're ready to explode! I'll read Celimene to your Alceste.

BARON

(As ALCESTE— though still not “there”)

Well, I've been quiet during these revelations,
Through all these insults and humiliations;
Haven't I restrained myself until now?
But I'm about to have a royal fit—

MOLIERE

(Reading as CELIMENE)

Your anger's justified, I must admit,
You may condemn me to the pit—
My treachery has come to light
You hate me now with all your might—
Please do, I cannot disallow—

BARON

Oh wretch, how can I hate you even now?
Though mind compel me to despise you, love,
My heart will not consent, though heaven above
Condemn your—

MOLIERE

No, no! More feeling! Here, let me have it—

*MOLIERE Seizes the script from
BARON; reads as ALCESTE.*

MOLIERE, *Continued*

Oh wretch, how could I hate you even now?
Though mind compel me to despise you, love,
My heart will not consent, though heaven above
Condemn your wickedness and sin
And counsel me to purge my love within...

ARMANDE has entered the room, unseen at first by BARON. MOLIERE, noticing her, pauses before continuing.

MOLIERE, *Continues*

But there is some excuse for your mistakes.
At twenty, you're an easy prey for fakes;
And I am willing to forgive the worst of your offenses
If you will come, contrite and humble, to your senses.

(Looking directly at ARMANDE)

We'll forget what's happened in the past...
There is, however, something I must ask—
No, demand, indeed, insist upon it—
You leave behind your baubles and your bonnets,
And seek a place that's far from social contact
Where we shall join our lives in holy contract.
In short, I offer you a life with me
If you will forsake all other company.

Speech by speech, ARMANDE moves to a position opposite MOLIERE as BARON cheats upstage, observing.)

ARMANDE

Am I at twenty to renounce this world to make amends
And leave behind my treasures, parents, and my friends?

MOLIERE

From this day on your friends are few, if any,
I wouldn't count on having very many—
And if our courtship were a true romance
You wouldn't give the world a second glance.

ARMANDE

Alceste, at twenty one is not at ease
With solitude, no matter what you please.
I'm certain I'd be bored to death were I to age
With you in some reclusive hermitage.

(A Beat—SHE smiles coyly.)

But if you'll find a horse and carriage
I'd gladly give my hand in marriage.

*MOLIERE looks upon her dumbly,
hoping beyond hope that the words are
meant for him. SHE breaks character.*

ARMANDE, *Continues*

Jean...it's your line.

MOLIERE

Armande... Have you memorized it all?

ARMANDE

I came to audition. Do I get the role?

MOLIERE

As Celimene?

ARMANDE

As your wife.

MOLIERE

Again?

ARMANDE

Still.

MOLIERE

You get them both, my pet.

*THEY search each other's eyes and find
a deep mutual affection that had not been
there previously. MOLIERE takes her
hands and kisses them. Beat. BARON
waits, taking it all in, apparently
impassive. Then MOLIERE and
ARMANDE separate. MOLIERE hands*

his script or sides to BARON. HE motions to them to proceed.

MOLIERE

Come, let's rehearse!

BLACKOUT. SOFT MUSIC plays: a SPOTLIGHT appears on LA GRANGE.

LA GRANGE

The most tangible result of this reunion was the birth of Jean's second son. (*Beat. HE frowns*) But the poor boy died just four weeks into this witless world. Moliere blamed the doctors for an overdose of antimony, adding to a long list of grievances against the self-styled healers of Paris. And so, his last play, the last in a series of attacks on all the quacks and charlatans, premiered last week—ah— (*Consulting his ledger*) —very successfully!

ACT II; SCENE SEVEN

AT RISE: Moliere's chamber. MOLIERE is seated on a chair; LA FORET standing by the door. BOILEAU enters. MOLIERE's coughing grows more persistent throughout the scene.

MOLIERE

(*Rising*) Nicolas, dear friend! Thank God. (*To LA FORET*) Bring us some wine and cheese, La Foret.

LA FORET

The doctor advised only milk, monsieur.

MOLIERE

A plague take the doctors! Wine and cheese!

LA FORET

Yes, m'lord, right away, m'liege. (*Exits*)

MOLIERE

I need your advice on a particular line, Nicolas. You attended the opening of "The Imaginary Invalid"?

BOILEAU

I confess—that is, Jean, a certain lady—

MOLIERE

Say no more.

BOILEAU

Your new work has produced considerable merriment. Your hypochondriac has released Paris from that melancholy Alceste with his colossal hubris.

MOLIERE

I'll ignore that, Nicolas. But the line in question— (*LA FORET enters with a tray of cheese, wine and glasses which SHE sets on a small table.*) Thank you, La Foret.

MOLIERE motions to NICOLAS and THEY sit together.

MOLIERE

Monsieur Fleurant is the pharmacist who comes to purge Argan's bowels.

BOILEAU

Argan—the central figure?

MOLIERE

Yes, the hypochondriac. Fleurant carries a large syringe—for the enemas, of course. Now Beralde—

LA FORET

That's Argan's brother-in-law, a very sensible gentleman—

MOLIERE

Beralde says to the pharmacist, "Obviously you're only accustomed to speaking to people's backsides."

BOILEAU

Mm.-hmm. What lines precede it?

LA FORET

Monsieur Fleurant says to Beralde, after he has objected to Argan's treatment, "What right have you to interfere? How dare you oppose sound medical treatment, and prevent this gentleman from purging his bowels?"

BOILEAU

Mmm...I have it! "Away with you, sir! Obviously you are unaccustomed to addressing people to their faces!"

LA FORET

(Clapping) Bravo! C'est magnifique!

MOLIERE

The line is well-turned, Nicolas.

BOILEAU

Frankly, Jean, I didn't come to doctor your play but to beg you to see a doctor. A real one!

*LA FORET pours the wine and the MEN
each take a sip.*

MOLIERE

A gentleman we know attended a renowned physician who consulted two colleagues about the poor fellow's illness. Instead of discussing his symptoms they debated about the fee to charge him and whether it is preferable to visit a patient on horseback or riding a mule.

BOILEAU

So?

MOLIERE

My physician called yesterday—riding a jackass. The diagnosis? Consumption. Covers an ocean of medical ignorance. He also offered to prolong my life for ten years if I would use my influence to get a court appointment for his son. I said I was not asking for ten years, and would be quite content if he could somehow manage not to kill me. And yes, I will play Argan tonight.

BOILEAU

Let du Croisy play the role. He's as healthy as a grenadier.

MOLIERE

Who better to play a man with imagined symptoms than someone with real ones?

LA FORET

Monsieur, please don't go tonight. Cancel the performance!

MOLIERE

(Firmly) I will play the part. Please, La Foret—the curtains!

LA FORET

Oh, the curtains—more light, more air, more wine—no, that's the wrong vintage! What if you are dead and gone, master, and there is no one to boss me around?

MOLIERE

Armande will boss you around, or Nicolas.

BOILEAU

I don't want the job!

LA FORET

(Taking MOLIERE's arm) Please stay home tonight. Save your health!

BOILEAU

She's right, Jean.

MOLIERE

(Rising, with finality) My dear friends... There are fifty poor workers in our theatre, and they have to survive in a callous world. They have only their wages to support them and their families. Our hypochondriac is making money for them and their children. The house may sell out again, and if I am not Argan tonight there will be no performance and no wages for the company.

BOILEAU

(Moved) Touché.

ARMANDE enters.

ARMANDE

What's this about the company? Good day, Monsieur Boileau.

BOILEAU

(Bows) Mademoiselle.

ARMANDE

Jean, dear, if you insist on playing tonight you must get some rest.

MOLIERE'S hand shakes and HE spills some wine.

ARMADE, Continues

What's wrong?

MOLIERE

Nothing. My hand just—trembled.

ARMANDE

Sit down, my love, you need to rest. *(HE does so.)*

MOLIERE

It's nothing. *(Making a joke of it)* "I shall have them cut off the one arm to allow the other to flourish."

BOILEAU

What?

LA FORET

(Wiping up the spill) Oh, it's a line from the play.

MOLIERE

Isn't Toinette the best of my saucy servants, La Foret? *(To BOILEAU)* Toinette, disguised as a learned doctor, pays a call on poor naïve Argan.

ARMANDE

(Giving MOLIERE a hug from behind) I love it! The “doctor” proposes all sorts of nonsensical treatments.

LA FORET

It's a delightful scene, monsieur. At the end of the play, Argan himself becomes a physician. It's the ideal solution to all those medical bills!

BOILEAU

He doctors himself for free? I see!

MOLIERE

Do you like the way it ends, La Foret? Armande? I always have trouble with endings.

ARMANDE

It's a fine ending. But Jean, dear—I just bought this outfit. *(Showing off)* How does it look?

MOLIERE

Stunning, my dear.

ARMANDE

Is my skirt straight? Perhaps too much powder?

MOLIERE

Only the left cheek. Remember to stay in profile.

ARMANDE

Oh, you naughty man!

MOLIERE

As to endings, Nicolas. If a play didn't require an ending I'd just as soon leave it without.

LIGHTS FADE OUT.

ACT II; SCENE EIGHT

La Malade Imaginaire

AT RISE: The “Play-within-a-play”. The transition into the scene must be such that the audience clearly understands that they are watching a staged performance of “The Imaginary Invalid.” *MOLIERE* plays *ARGAN*, *LA GRANGE* appears as *BERALDE*, and *ARMANDE* as *TOINETTE*. *AT RISE:* *MOLIERE*, slumped in a very impressive old chair center stage appears very ill. *LA GRANGE* and *ARMANDE*, each having added costume pieces to reflect their characters of a Gentleman and a Maid, join *MOLIERE* and the “Play- within-a-play” begins.

LA GRANGE (AS BERALDE)

Brother, it occurs to me—why not doctor yourself? It would be much more convenient to become your own physician.

ARMANDE (AS TOINETTE)

Quite so! A capital suggestion! There is no disease so bold as to attack the person of a doctor.

MOLIERE (AS ARGAN)

I think you are joshing me, brother. At my age, how can I become a student?

LA GRANGE

Why should you have to study? You are wise enough already. There are a great many people who are not as clever as you.

MOLIERE

But one has to speak Latin well, and know the various diseases and their remedies.

LA GRANGE

When you put on a doctor’s cap and gown that all comes with it. Then you will be smarter than you imagine.

MOLIERE

What! If I put on a doctor’s cap I will be able to diagnose diseases?

LA GRANGE

Yes, you just have to hold forth! When you are wearing a cap and gown, anything you say is learned, and rubbish is considered to be wisdom. Well, shall we have it done?

MOLIERE

What, now?

LA GRANGE

Yes, in your home. I know some doctors, friends of mine, who are coming here to perform the ceremony. And it will cost you nothing!

LA GRANGE and ARMANDE clap their hands and MUSIC is played as a procession of DOCTORS, played by members of the COMPANY – that is MONFLEURY, KING LOUIS, BOILEAU, BARON, the PRIEST – ensues. The “DOCTORS” will enter with the beat of the music, wearing academic caps and gowns, preferably red in color, although black will do as well. The members of the COMPANY wear masks, so that THEY are not recognized. The DOCTORS march in grandly and encircle MOLIERE, speaking in unison, as a CHORUS.

CHORUS OF DOCTORS

(In rhythm)

Hippocratus benedictus
In hoc signo pronovictus
Clysostatium pergatore (*Pronounced “tor-E”*)
Bonum bene bloodum gore (*“gor-E”*)!

The DOCTORS cease momentarily.

MOLIERE

(Prompted by a nod from LA GRANGE)

Clysostatium pergatore
Bonum bene bloodum gore!

The DOCTORS resume marching around MOLIERE.

CHORUS OF DOCTORS

Bonum bene hoc respondum
Stickum purgem intestinatum
Consultatibus implere?
Answeratibus de jure?

The DOCTORS complete their march

MOLIERE

Clysostatum pergatore
Bonum bene bloodum gore

CHORUS OF DOCTORS

(Insistently) Consultatibus implere
Answeratibus de jure?

The CHORUS FREEZES as LA GRANGE, the MASTER OF CEREMONIES, addresses MOLIERE.

LA GRANGE

Monsieur Argan, are you prepared to become a physician, the most revered of all professions?

MOLIERE

(Rising, with difficulty) Yes... Yes!

LA GRANGE

Then upon your declaration of intent, we grant you membership in the medical fraternity, with all the rights and privileges appertaining thereto. I place this golden ring upon your finger to signify that you...

LA GRANGE silently mouths another sentence as the LIGHTS DIM and MUSIC changes to something soft and eerie; perhaps a single high note extended. An APPARITION of MADELEINE appears dressed all in white and bathed in LIGHT, her hand reaching towards MOLIERE. MOLIERE, now oblivious to the induction ceremony which has frozen in time behind him, slowly crosses towards MADELEINE. In this surreal moment,

THEY never quite touch physically, but the emotional subtext is powerful.

MADELEINE

Come, Jean...

MOLIERE (*AS HIMSELF*)

“Where should I turn? My love is mocked, whichever way I move.”

MADELEINE

No, Jean. Comedy.

MOLIERE

You were right, Madeleine. You were almost always right.

MADELEINE

It’s time, my dear, my love.

MOLIERE

Yes, time. Tragedy plays longer...takes more time.

MADELEINE

Comedy, Jean. “Must you die with all these people around? I wouldn’t mind if you had finished cutting the wood.”

Turning from MADELEINE, who disappears from the scene, MOLIERE slowly shifts back to the present.

MOLIERE

Finished...I must...finish...

For a moment there is dead silence. Then the LIGHTS restore. MOLIERE turns back toward LA GRANGE and the “Play-within-a-play” resumes.

LA GRANGE

Monsieur Argan! Do you swear the physician’s oath?

MOLIERE

Indeed, yes! (*Coughing*) Juro! I swear it! I—

MOLIERE lapses into a prolonged coughing spell and falls to the floor in front of his chair. ARMANDE cries “Jean!” and the OTHERS rush to him

alarmed. An ACTOR calls offstage for the curtains to be pulled. The Curtain closes or, sans a curtain, the LIGHTS DIM as MICHAEL BARON, still gowned, removes his mask and steps forward to address the Audience.

BARON

Ladies and gentlemen, I beg your indulgence...Please—withhold your applause—thank you. I'm sorry—it seems that Monsieur Moliere has taken ill and he must leave the theatre. The play is complete as it stands.

BARON bows and exits abruptly. BLACK OUT.

ACT II; SCENE NINE

AT RISE: A MUSICAL BRIDGE allows COMPANY to exit. A SOFT SPOTLIGHT appears on LA GRANGE standing with his ledger.

LA GRANGE

(To Audience) Moliere was quickly taken by carriage to Baron's house nearby, then to his own home. He was coughing up blood. I hurriedly totaled the evening's take—I wanted to be at his side as soon as possible. While I finished the books, Jean-Baptiste was attended by some members of the company.

SPOTLIGHT OUT as LA GRANGE exits with LIGHTS UP later that evening on Moliere's chamber. MOLIERE is in his bed propped up with pillows with a side table nearby. LA FORET remains steadfastly close by, a bowl in hand, to catch his vomit and to wipe the sweat from his brow. ARMANDE attends to him as well while BARON and BOILEAU hover in the background.

MOLIERE

(Weakly) Where is...La Foret...It's so dark in here!

LA FORET

Yes, Master.

LA FORET moves a standing candelabra closer to Moliere's bedside. *SHE* lights a few of the candles.

MOLIERE

Where is Armande?

ARMANDE

Here, my love.

MOLIERE

(Taking her hand) You were stunning tonight, my pet.

ARMANDE

But my face—I think too much eye shadow?

MOLIERE

Gives you a mysterious look. *(Coughing)* Oh, it hurts!

ARMANDE

La Foret, empty the bowl and bring it back again!

LA FORET exits. *MOLIERE* begins to cough again. The coughing brings up blood. The *OTHERS* respond helplessly.

MOLIERE

I have stained the quilt.

ARMANDE

It's nothing. *(Calling off)* La Foret!

LA FORET quickly returns with bowl and towels.

ARMANDE, *Continues*

Wipe that up, please.

LA FORET towels the bedcover.

MOLIERE

Will someone laugh for me? Laughter purges pain. Nicolas, are you there?

BOILEAU

Here, Jean...

Why so silent?
MOLIERE

I—I don't know what to say.
BOILEAU

Praise my work and say that you love me, friend.
MOLIERE

(*Seizing his hand*) God knows I love you!
BOILEAU

(*Musters a chuckle*) And you call yourself an atheist!
MOLIERE

Agnostic, Jean. I've been converted!
BOILEAU

MOLIERE laughs; coughs.

Would monsieur like some hot broth?
LA FORET

Yes, please. (*LA FORET exits.*) And I would like a priest, although...
MOLIERE

We will send for one.
ARMANDE

He may not come.
MOLIERE

Do you plan to confess, Master?
BARON

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes

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AUTHOR'S PRODUCTION SUGGESTIONS

Considering the episodic nature of the play, with frequent transitions, elaborate scenery may get in the way. The work can be performed with a unit set or on a relatively bare stage, with the costuming and baroque music providing the tone for the 17th Century setting. Within a “black box” one option would be to hang two or three large floor-length tapestries or period-related designs on muslin near the back of the stage. Such a backdrop would not only enhance the setting but provide space for waiting actors and one or two openings for entrances.

If using a proscenium stage and blessed with a larger budget, one might add painted flats on either side to suggest the wing-and-drop staging common to the period, possibly with a baroque-looking border across the top of the proscenium. But there are many options for a scenic designer to consider.

Period costuming, including wigs, is suggested. However, a creative costume designer might instead produce an ensemble dress with “silhouette costuming” that suggests the period without representing it precisely. With strict period costuming, a robe or gown suitable for the bedroom may be required for Moliere, Madeleine, and Armande, in addition to their full-dress outfits. Academic robes and caps are needed for *The Imaginary Invalid* “play-within,” as well as masks.

Key hand-props include La Grange’s ledger, Montfleury’s cane, La Foret’ feather-duster, Du Parc’s fan, and Moliere’s pen and inkwell. The key set pieces are Moliere’s writing-desk and chair, a vanity and chair for Madeleine’s and Armande’s chambers, additional period chairs or a settee as needed, and a wooden “four-poster” bed, if possible. This bed may be introduced in ACT I; Scene 1, then used for both Madeleine and Moliere’s chambers, moved to opposite sides of the stage to indicate the one or the other. A designer might choose to create a vanity for the ladies that would convert into Moliere’s desk.

In any case, a minimal amount of wing space is vital to the storage and movement of set props (furniture) needed for the various locations. But if offstage space is limited, an old-fashioned divan or settee may substitute for the bed, beginning with ACT I; Scene 1. The same divan may replace the bed elsewhere. Even when Armande wants to get Moliere into bed with her (ACT I, Scene 8) a divan may work almost as well, and in Moliere’s death scene (ACT II; Scene 8), an upholstered chair plus a hassock for his feet may serve. In other words, the bed is not *absolutely* essential.

A small side-table will be used occasionally and, of course, standing candelabra for the final scene. A storage trunk placed strategically onstage containing costume accessories or hand props for easy access by the actors may facilitate the actors’ “business” in the more humorous scenes, such as ACT II; Scene 3, where they lampoon Montfleury in rehearsing the King’s “lever”.