THE MISANTHROPE: 2012 VIA 1981

by

Richard Lucas
BFA, Theatre, The University of Alberta, 1975

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Abstract

The Misanthrope, a play written by French author Molière in 1666, remains relevant to modern audiences, as evidenced by recent high profile productions at the Stratford Festival, and on prestigious stages in New York, London, and Toronto. This paper examines different productions and translations, analyzes the play itself, and concludes with a proposal for a presentation of The Misanthrope that, I believe, will best connect with a Canadian audience in 2012.

Chapter 1 is an examination of the play, its historical context, and its different translations. In Chapter 2, I analyse the characters and the themes of the play. Chapter 3 is a report on my 1981 presentation of The Misanthrope at the Dorothy Somerset Theatre at UBC. In Chapter 4, I provide an in-depth exploration and directorial analysis of how I would produce a staging of The Misanthrope in 2012.
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Chapter 1. Molière and The Misanthrope through the Ages

Molière is often described as the father of modern French comedy; the most beloved of French authors (Bishop vii), and his play *The Misanthrope* is commonly considered to be a masterpiece of social satire. Over 400 years later it is still extremely popular with modern theatre goers. It tells the story of Alceste, a Parisian nobleman, who loathes the rampant hypocrisy, deceit and false flattery of his world. Although he hates society and everyone in it, he falls in love with a woman who embodies everything he despises. He rails, kicks, screams, insults, sues and fights with her, her other suitors, authors, lawyers, judges, servants, his friends, his enemies, and himself. Although he may or may not be correct, he concludes she has been unfaithful, that she and all of the rest of mankind are despicable, and goes in to voluntary exile to remove himself from society.

The play opens with Alceste incensed after seeing his best friend, Philinte, warmly embrace and greet a man as if he was an old and dear friend, and then privately confess that he has no idea who the man is. He berates Philinte for what he views as his shallow conduct, and proceeds to lecture him on all the faults of the superficial and dishonest age in which they live. Philinte points out the irony that Célimène, the woman Alceste loves, is, by way of her tendency to flatter and flirt with his rival suitors only to savagely ridicule them behind their backs, the antithesis of the virtues that Alceste professes to admire. He also suggests that Alceste rage less about society and focus more on the current lawsuit that has been brought against him. Alceste brushes this advice aside and states that today is the day he is going to demand that Célimène send her other admirers away.
Before Alceste gets to Célimène’s salon he is met by an acquaintance, the powerful noble Oronte, who professes his vast admiration for him. Despite Alceste’s refusal of his request for a formal vow of friendship, Oronte insists upon receiving Alceste’s opinion on a sonnet he has written. Oronte’s writing is laughable and Alceste, true to his penchant for brutal honesty over polite flattery, declares it “shoddy” (Wilbur 42), and leaves the shocked and furious Oronte behind as he stomps off to confront Célimène.

Célimène assures Alceste that he is her one true love but refuses to honor Alceste’s request to banish her other suitors for fear of offending those who could harm her social standing. She then proceeds to admit two of the suitors that Alceste finds most objectionable. With the foppish Acaste and Clitandre as her giddily adoring audience, Célimène proceeds to unleash a plethora of bitchy yet entertaining comments about many of their mutual friends. A guard arrives to summon the disgusted Alceste to the Marshalls so they can arbitrate his quarrel with Oronte. As he departs, Célimène’s main rival, the older Arsinoé, arrives. She has come to offer her council, and to warn Célimène that all of the current gossip about her loose morals is putting her reputation in jeopardy. In truth Arsinoé is simply jealous of Célimène’s youth, beauty, and the men she attracts. A delightful war of words ensues and the two women exchange jibes about each other’s virtue and honor, or lack thereof.

As Alceste arrives back from the Marshalls, Célimène tires of the present company and leaves him with Arsinoé. Once they are alone, Arsinoé informs Alceste that he has been betrayed by Célimène and that, if he accompanies her home, she will show him the evidence to prove it. Philinte is left alone in Célimène’s salon with her cousin, the charming and reasonable Éliante who also resides there. He reports to her about Alceste and Oronte’s
amusing hearing with the Marshalls, and their subsequent rapprochement. The conversation leads to a discussion of affairs of the heart. Philinte tells Éliante that, due to her honest nature and solid character, she would be a better match for Alceste; Éliante replies that she wishes he and Célimène well, but if her cousin chooses another, she would gladly be his second choice. Since the cards are now on the table, Philinte professes his love for Éliante and volunteers that he would also be most happy to be second best.

Alceste returns with a letter that he claims Célimène has written to Oronte in which he has found shameful evidence of her betrayal. When confronted, she admits the writing is hers, but says it was written to a woman friend. She proceeds to talk him out of his rage and back into her heart. Alceste’s manservant enters and says he must leave as there is a serious matter that requires his immediate attention. We later learn that Alceste has lost his lawsuit.

Meanwhile, Oronte has come to demand that Célimène declare her love for him. Alceste returns in the middle of the conversation and also demands that she make her choice. Before she can answer, Acaste, Clitandre and Arsinoé enter with a letter that they read aloud, in which Célimène skewers each one of them in turn. Oronte drops her on the spot, Arsinoé takes the opportunity to make an unsuccessful play for Alceste who then tells Célimène he is willing to forgive her if she willing to leave the corrupting influence of city life behind and go into exile with him. She refuses to “die in some hermitage” (Wilbur 149), but does offers to marry him if he agrees to remain in the city. He refuses, and immediately asks Éliante to marry him. She refuses him and infers that her growing affection for Philinte is the reason. Unhappy but unwilling to compromise, Alceste then flees, followed by his loyal friends Philinte and Éliante who will try and comfort him.
How does this seventeenth century French play written in verse remain relevant through the ages? What are the characteristics that keep this particular work so compelling that, last year in Canada, the play was presented at two of the nation’s most prestigious theatres? In my view, the secret of The Misanthrope's timelessness lies, primarily, in the social types embodied by its characters. As I prepare, in 2012, to direct the play for a second time, I have re-examined these types in relation to their original source (the court of Louis XIV) and then reflected upon their portrayal in three recent translations and productions; two, which like my initial production in 1981, have sought to reframe the play for contemporary audiences by finding new incarnations of those original "types" in the popular culture of the twentieth century, and one that remained utterly faithful to the play’s original historical time period. I then went on to survey some of the critical response to these productions and to develop my own assessment of how effective the various dramaturgical strategies that these productions employed might be in successful in communicating the spirit of Molière’s original to a modern Canadian audience.

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, aka Molière, was born in 1622 to a bourgeois family in Paris where his father held the honourable and profitable position of Master Upholsterer to His Majesty. Young Jean was sent to a Jesuit school where he developed a taste for the stage while appearing in numerous productions of the classic repertory that were performed in Latin. After his later law studies he returned to work in his father’s shop in Paris. Upon receiving an inheritance when he turned twenty-one, he horrified his family by announcing that he was going to embark on a career in the theatre. In 1644 he established a new company L’Illustre Théâtre and took the stage name of Molière (Bishop 62). For the next twelve years he wandered through France learning his craft before returning to Paris in 1658
where one of his farces became an immediate hit. His theatrical career became a record of almost continual success, and for the next fifteen years he managed, directed, acted in starring roles and wrote twenty-nine plays. Championed by the Sun King himself, Louis XIV, who installed him in his own theatre under his patronage, and Molière’s company became known as the “Kings Players” (Parker: 1665). His Majesty even performed with the troupe in such later comedy ballets as The Magnificent Suitor (Parker: 1670).

Louis XIV, born in 1638, was crowned in 1654 and was a young man when Molière first returned to Paris. The 1660’s were a time of reform and rebuilding in all aspects of French life (Hatton 63). Louis’ passionate interest in the armed forces was matched by his absorption in the French intellectual and artistic life (72). It was Molière’s good fortune to be a chosen entertainer of a young king who had such passions, especially for the theatre (Howarth 41). Louis was a generous patron of the arts (Kettering 67), as evidenced by his establishment of an official list of pensions for writers and artists, and his court became a site of cultural trendsetting (Briggs 194).

The leading characters of The Misanthrope were all written as ladies and gentlemen of the court of Louis XIV. Royal patronage was needed for advancement at court and Louis himself maintained a close personal control over its distribution (Kettering 65). His palace at Versailles was a national meeting place where socially prestigious nobles went to see, and be seen, and the inhabitants, at any given time, could number up to twenty-five thousand courtiers, officials and servants (Hatton 97). There was a good living to be made at court if one was connected. The judges of the time were known to skilfully use their influence at court to bolster their own economic interest (110). A Misanthrope character like Alceste might attend court to try and seek help with his lawsuit. Less flashy and connected nobles
like Philinte and Éliante might attend to try and secure a favour or a position from the king. Characters like Acaste and Clitandre may well have served as commission agents who sold their services as a go-between for lesser or provincial nobles to get the ear of the king or his senior advisors and would glory in parading the latest outrageous and extravagant fashions as a way of demonstrating their prestige. Clever Arsinoé may have made a substantial income at court from her skilful card play. A handsome fellow like Oronte might have enjoyed one of the greatest court hobbies, the seduction of other men’s wives. The rule of the court according to the Duchesse d’Orléans was that “a woman’s honour consisted of having commerce with no one but her husband, but for a man it is not shameful to have mistresses” (Kettering 28). (This was evidenced by Louis himself who had many. His majesty was known to have spawned eleven illegitimate offspring between 1662 and 1678.

In this society, a woman had no political, and few civil rights and only experienced true authority and independence if she was a widow like Célimène (Kettering 23). Our heroine of the play, in real life, would have been a noble Parisian who presided over her salon, insisting upon witty, intelligent conversation and good manners (71); all valuable skills in navigating life at court. Some of the salons had a reputation for erudition, others for frivolity. Célimène’s salon most likely resembled one of the most celebrated of the time, that of Madame de Rambouillet, whose guests may have included nobles, writers and their patrons and financiers (78).

The Misanthrope was first presented in June 1666 and exactly three hundred years later, author Tony Harrison set his adaption of The Misanthrope in 1966 (although it was actually produced in 1973), for the National Theatre Company at the Old Vic starring celebrated British actress Diana Rigg as Célimène (Harrison v). Rigg also notably performed
in this production in the USA on Broadway and was nominated for a 1975 Best Actress Tony award.

Although there is no such stage direction in the original French, Tony Harrison chooses to open his adaptation of the play with Alceste sitting alone in the darkness of a Parisian penthouse. Having escaped from the wild swinging sixties party in progress below he is listening to the music of Lully on the “hifi” (Harrison 1). Lully was in fact an Italian composer who was a contemporary of Molière’s and collaborated with him by composing the music for several of the Kings Players comedy ballets (Parker: 1669). At the sight of the very mid twentieth century “hifi”, we immediately know we are not in 1666 and are prepared for this modern version of Molière with mentions of “cabs” and “cars” (Harrison 20, 26), and references to current magazines “Elle” and “Marie Claire” (32). Harrison’s characters seamlessly translate from the reign of Louis XIV to the twentieth century “reign” of Charles de Gaulle. Our characters’ professions remain as undefined as in Molière’s original, but they are clearly the upper crust of Parisian society of the day who are both artistically and politically connected, and, like Molière’s originals, seek to advance, or at least maintain, their precious social standing by demonstrating their intelligence and taste to the public acclaim of the elite to which they belong. Acaste and Clitandre are specifically noted as modern day nobles, both with the title of “Marquis” (18). Acaste is written as a newspaper columnist “blue blood” on the best-dressed list and we are told that our would-be poet Oronte is very connected at the Elysée, the official residence of the French President.

Philinte amusingly describes our leading lady Célimène as “the reigning queen of bitchy wits” (8). Our hero, Alceste, is identified as a well-known author and perhaps even a member of the Académie Française, the body of “immortals” who oversee all matters of
French language and culture. Harrison’s world is filled with Austin Powers look-alikes who smoke lots of cigarettes and positively inhale champagne. Why, he has our heroine Célimène down two glasses before she speaks her first line of the play (16)!

Harrison’s work proves that an updated Misanthrope can speak to modern audiences and critics as evidenced by favourable reviews like “While true to Molière’s spirit, the play is also engagingly new” (Kidel), and “An exquisite modern day staging…aided by Tony Harrison’s brilliant 1973 translation…” (Mahoney). However, I don’t believe that Harrison’s adaption is the best choice for a director seeking to connect with Canadian audiences in 2012.

Harrison states that his work is a “version” of The Misanthrope and that his modern English adaptation “has the advantage of anchoring it in a more assessable society” (v). My opinion is that this may have been fine for British audiences, but setting his play in a Parisian loft, and pairing it with trendy language and Brit-speak like “chips” (22), makes it alienating “second generation” Molière to we Canadians by first being first translated from the French, and then regionalized with British colloquialisms. Harrison states that “The salient feature of Molière’s verse is its vigour and energy” (vi). I agree, and although there are many things to admire in Harrison’s successful updating, later in this chapter we will examine another translation which captures the vigor and energy of the original even more successfully and in a manner better suited to contemporary Canadian audiences.

Another popular version of our time is Martin Crimp’s. It is also filled with abundant modern British references; many of them updated even since its 1996 premiere. Crimp has taken great liberties in reinventing The Misanthrope. He turns Alceste into a self-important
playwright, Célimène into a stunning young American film star and the setting relocates from the Paris of King Louis XIV to a modern day luxury London hotel penthouse. The script is rife with Brit-speak like “total bollocks” (5), “she slags people off” (12), and inside jokes including a great dig at X-Factor’s Simon Cowell as a “total creep” on whose TV show “any vulnerable girl’s allowed to sing like shit if it’ll please the crowd.” (35). Speaking of shit, in this adaption that word is used another thirteen times, and versions of “fuck”, “fucked”, or “fucking” are trotted out by Crimp on more than twenty occasions over the five acts! To complement the classical sounds of “arse, piss and prick”, Crimp’s audience should be given dictionaries with their programs as they enter the theatre. His erudite characters spurt words like “sycophancy” (5), “malefactions” (9), “anathema” (59), “semiotician” (65) and “paralytic” (83). Perhaps the firing up of Blackberries should be allowed during a Crimp production so the audience can understand the elitist references of “Derrida, Roland Barthes” (65), “Wittgenstein” (79), and the like. In the midst of being tirelessly British and modern, Crimp makes numerous “nods” to the seventeenth century and references Molière directly when John tells Alceste that one of his rants is “sounding like something straight out of Molière” (7), and when Alex says Alceste “thinks of himself as some kind of misanthrope” (89). We are also offered the Act 5 device of all the characters, excepting Alceste, in fancy dress of the court of Louis XIV for a costume party, and the awkward musings of Ellen when she states she is “getting a so-weird seventeenth century feeling from all of this” (41). Even Jennifer gives a shout-out to one of Molière’s old buddies, the aforementioned composer Lully (38).

The production of Crimp’s version in early 2011 at Toronto’s Tarragon Theatre was soundly spanked by the critics. The Globe and Mail reviewer J. Kelly Nestruck stated that
although director “Richard Rose’s production generally stands up”, it had “bizarre tics” including the inappropriate use of theatrical “asides”, “overdosing on hot pink in the design” and that the musical “use of decade old hits subtracts from the contemporary resonance”.

The main contention of the reviewer, to which I heartily concur, is that “this British-dialect updating of The Misanthrope is actually distancing for a Canadian audience”. Well-respected Canadian theatre critic Richard Ouzounian agreed. Although he has great respect for Molière’s The Misanthrope, he calls this production “profoundly wrong” and asks “Why is the home of Canadian playwriting spending so much money and effort producing a 15 year old British modernization of a Molière play dedicated to a mind-set that was probably outdated in England when it was first presented?” He suggests that if one wishes to update, that the Tarragon should have had a Canadian playwright have a go at a modern adaptation. Ouzounian cheekily states “I thought Canada stopped being one of the colonies years ago” and points out that at least a new Canadian adaption might “gives us jokes with a topical sting, instead of tired one-liners about Tom Stoppard” (Ouzounian: This Misanthrope Is Hard to Like). That said, I must celebrate that, in the midst of Crimp’s linguistic snobbery, there are some lines that are flat out brilliantly funny. I am particularly fond of Alceste telling the would-be playwright Covington in the heat of verbal battle, “Make a scene? You can hardly write one” (83), and my very favourite is when Covington speaks of a “Lloyd-Webber musical…or some other natural disaster” (17). However the clever dialogue is overshadowed by Crimp’s use of modern vulgarity and elitist references which devalue the poetry of the original by dragging the material into a literary gutter that was never intended. Audiences of a 1666 production of The Misanthrope did not have to hear the verse demeaned by obscenities, or reach for a dictionary, and neither should the audiences of 2012. Crimp’s
choices are those of a self-conscious adapter trying to be clever. They do not help to communicate the timelessness of Molière’s themes, and in fact diminish the author’s intent, and distort the universality of his characters.

Richard Wilbur’s historically and poetically faithful version of The Misanthrope was produced at Canada’s Stratford Festival in 2011 directed by David Grindley and starring Ben Carlson as Alceste and Sarah Topham as Célimène. Before examining critical response to the production, I would like to contrast Wilbur’s use of language with that of the two translator/adaptors previously mentioned. In Act 1, Tony Harrison’s Philinte says “Has the widow you’re besotted by eschewed frivolity for your stern rectitude; this dug-out of ideals?” (7), compared with the flowing and musical Wilbur translation of “May I inquire whether this rectitude you so admire, and these hard virtues you’re enamoured of, are qualities of the lady whom you love?” (27). Also in Act One, Martin Crimp’s John (Philinte) responds to a rant by Alceste by rhyming “Isn’t that the quintessent” with “of the moody adolescent”, and in the next line, “swallowing fifty paracetamol” with “morally more acceptable” (4). In the Wilbur version the same passage is both more pleasing to the ear and more understandable as he rhymes “It hardly seems a hanging matter to me’ with “I hope that you will take it graciously” and “a slight reprieve” with “by your leave”(17). Globe and Mail reviewer J. Kelly Nestuck had a lot more positive things to say about this Misanthrope starting with the headline of “With this fine cast, Molière’s 17th-century masterpiece still resonates” and he carried on to wax eloquent that this was “a lovely production that makes it seem as if little has changed between the times of Louis XIV and ours”. Richard Ouzounian at the Toronto Sun was less impressed as he as he stated that “despite the virtually flawless acting” he felt that Grindley’s direction, including the very traditional period costumes and sets, had made it
just a “classic evening of museum theatre” (Ouzounian: *This Misanthrope Is Hard to Like*).

Even though he reported that the production was “smartly acted, beautifully designed and carefully staged” it did not achieve the “window into timelessness”. Upon my recent careful re-examinations of this play it is clear that Wilbur’s translation remains my favourite. Some of the updated versions sound even more dated than the older Wilbur. A New York Times theatre review remarks that “Mr. Wilbur has given us a sound, modern, conversational poetry and has made Molière’s *The Misanthrope* brilliantly our own” (Zinoman).

This process of comparison has reinforced for me that the best way to provide the “window into timelessness” that Ouzounian longs for is to stick faithfully to Wilbur’s text while boldly updating the “world of the play” through design elements. Harrison's characters capture the spirit of the original but his poetry is not up to the standard of Molière. Crimp's version is too self-consciously clever, too dated in its own way by being over specific in its pop culture references, and demeans Molière's poetry by dragging it down into the gutter. Wilbur's translation captures the essence of Molière's language brilliantly but, if performed in an ultra-faithful period production, might still fail to connect to a contemporary audience and instead come across as a quaint museum piece. For me, the solution I found to this quandary in my 1981 production has been reinforced by my current research.

I will now explore the plays themes and analyse its characters. Along the way, I will continue to compare Wilbur’s historically faithful translation with, in my view, the less satisfactory adaptations of Harrison and Crimp and to point out ways in which their treatment of character alternatively enhances or detracts from the spirit of Molière’s original.
Chapter 2. Characters of The Misanthrope

*The Misanthrope* is an examination of how we should behave in society. It centres on the dynamic leading character of Alceste who has a passionate conviction that one should act in society with unflinching honesty. This is at odds with how the superficial, flattery-driven society actually works. The ultimate irony is that our hero has a blind spot. He’s in love with Célimène, a woman whose social behaviour exemplifies the very world that he hates. The humour of the play is in the conflict that ensues as a result of this predicament. The characters of Philinte and Éliante serve as our human barometers by which we may gauge each side from their firm middle ground. Molière illuminates the tragic contradictions of the human condition by contrasting the philosophic tolerance of Philinte and Éliante, with the falseness at the core of a corrupt society through characters like vain Clitandre and Acaste, shallow Oronte, devious Arsinoé and insincere Célimène. Then he proceeds to skewer jealous Alceste by illustrating the ways in which his well-founded criticisms of the ills of society take a back seat when the needs of his own vast ego are at stake. Philinte agrees with Alceste’s assessment of the human race in Act 5 when he states that he’ll “readily concede this is a low, dishonest age indeed” but asks “must we then abandon the society of men” because they are “beastly” and have “shabby ways,” (Wilbur 132). Molière presents us with representatives and arguments from the left, the right and the centre. Is idle flattery worse than cruel frankness? To find our happy place in society are we meant to accommodate and compromise; to make our own peace with the superficiality and insincerity around us? We, the audience are left to judge these matters.
What a complicated fellow is our leading man Alceste! His struggle is very complex and dramatic, yet he needs to come across as a comic hero because when all is said and done, this play is a comedy. At the same time he also must be more than simply laughable. His many faults need to do more than amuse us, because his social comment and outrages were, and still are, so very valid! At the foundation of his railings, there is truth. I believe Molière meant for Alceste’s antics to disarm an audience so that, as a result, they would be more open to examining the themes of this work and consequently re-evaluating the way that society operates.

The actor cast in this role has a monumental task to bring the character to life while successfully marrying its numerous and disparate sides. Fortunately, Molière has given us a wealth of material in the script to examine in order to sort out the truth that lies between all of the play’s flatteries and insults. All of the evidence from the author’s drawing of the character of Philinte paints him as a trusted friend; the loyal “BFF” we all would choose to have as our wingman. Although Philinte is a sincere supporter and a loyal comrade of Alceste’s, at various points of the play he describes him as an “angry spirit” (Wilbur 67), and “stubborn child” (103), given to “ugly moods” (16), “philosophic rage” (20), and “sullen humours” (104). These result in “rude” outbursts (15), during which he will alternately, “rage and rant” (21) or “storm and rave” (23).

But if Alceste is solely played as a zealot on his soapbox the play will fail. The audience must come to see past any conceit and come to admire, if not agree, with many of his grand passions; for he is clearly admired by the other characters in the play. Again, let us look at the evidence from Molière himself. The script tells us that all three very different leading ladies love and admire him. Célimène tells him clearly “You have my love.”
(Wilbur 52) Honest Éliante states that if her cousin rebuffs him that she would “gladly play the role of substitute.” (106), or as translated by Harrison, “I’ll be waiting to accept Alceste.”

Even Arsinoé, the prude, is smitten by Alceste and coquettishly tells him that if he is saddened by her evidence of Célimène’s betrayal that “Perhaps [she] can provide some consolation.” (100), or as Harrison translates even more bluntly, “If you ever feel like love again; it may be that Arsinoé can find some far gentler way of being kind” (38). We must also consider the fact that Oronte desires to be his friend. Alceste describes his rival as “noble, brave and virtuous” (103), and in Harrison the same passage is translated to read that, “He is a man of distinction in every way” (43), despite the fact that Oronte is a poor writer.

It is notable and illuminating that such a man as Oronte, well aware of our hero’s abrasive reputation, is still actively seeking him as a friend.

Although we must take all this evidence with a grain of salt due to the culture of insincerity and flattery of the times, there is enough proof to show us that Alceste, despite his misanthropic bent, also exhibits many fine qualities and an overall attractive personality. As for his physique, Oronte calls him “little fellow” in Wilbur’s translation (42), and “little man” in Harrison’s (15), and conversely Alceste describes Oronte, respectively, as “my great big fellow” (Wilbur 42) and Hercules (Harrison 15). One should be mindful of this evidence when casting. It does not have to mean that Alceste needs to be short or small, but it does indicate that Oronte should be bigger and taller than Alceste so as to not jar the audience and take them out of the “world of the play” as detailed by William Ball (Ball 31). In regard to our leading man’s wardrobe, it should be noted that he is described as wearing “green ribbons” (Wilbur 143), or “green velvet” (Harrison 64), and this needs to be carefully referenced in his costuming for the same reason. Some scholars believe the “green ribbons”
denote Alceste as a fashionable man, while others argue that it paints him as unfashionable. The latter seems to be more in tune with Molière’s position that Alceste does not fit well in to society. I would therefore change the words to “green tie”, and have my Alceste sport a particularly putrid shade, or to “cheap suit”. Neither would change the cadence and musicality of the rhyme and either would support Molière’s intent.

A director of *The Misanthrope* must have a firm hand and a clear concept to successfully guide the actor playing Alceste to a portrayal that both serves the playwright and pleases the audience. We must laugh at him, but after we have clucked at his utter conceit, we must see him as sincere, truly human and not only likable, but maybe even lovable. This is why I feel the characterization in Crimp’s adaptation presents problems. Crimp takes the liberty of painting Alceste as a man with a “psychiatric disorder” (73), to whom love is a “disease” (29). The stage directions even indicate that he exhibits “increasing violence” (78), and that he “slaps her face” in the heat of an Act 5 argument with Célimène (72). None of this is helpful to serve Molière’s intent because an audience must understand and even sympathise that Alceste has reasonable grounds to be upset.

Our leading lady Célimène is written as a great beauty and a great wit. Alceste speaks of her “beauty and grace” (Wilbur 107), and Acaste compliments “her charms and graces, which are many” (68). Her vicious descriptions of some of the popular characters of the court are delightfully clever and bitchy to both her audience of suitors in the play and her audience in the theatre. In the original French, Molière has written her to be twenty, which is reflected by both Harrison and Wilbur, and Crimp pegs her at twenty-two.

Arsinoé describes her as a “notorious coquette” (Wilbur 88) and later speaks with
some resentment when she notes that Célimène seems to get away with murder (91). With all that said, Célimène is still much more of an enigma than our leading man Alceste. When I deconstruct the play I have pages of information of what other characters say of him and what he says about himself. In the case of Célimène, her character is more of a mystery and there is only about one third the amount of similar detail for her. Crimp takes great liberties in his adaption in which he reinvents her as Jennifer, a cocaine snorting, one-step-from-porn, iconic yet slutty American film star. Although it is delightful writing when Crimp has Marcia (his Arsinoé) describes her as “transatlantic trash” (Crimp 60), it does not serve the original character and themes of Molière. Crimp’s “mind fucked” (56) movie star who performs “abhorrent sex scenes” (52), is a very different animal than Wilbur’s young widow who exhibits “brittle malice and coquettish ways” (Wilbur 7).

My theory is that she was a girl from a minor noble family who came out of the convent to marry at seventeen. At nineteen she was widowed by her older, very wealthy husband who was well connected at court. At twenty, after a quiet and sheltered teenage life as a married woman, she has become the mistress of her domain where she is presently bursting with energy and delighting in new freedoms. After the winter of arranged marriage to an older man she is celebrating the spring of wealth, privilege and an army of handsome suitors. Célimène is having far too much fun to pick just one and settle down again so soon. As she says to Alceste “If I should smile on one and scorn the rest, then you might have some cause to be distressed” (Wilbur 51). When push comes to shove at the end of the play I do believe she stands by her statement to Alceste; “You know you do have my love” (52), but he asks too much. She is willing to declare for him, to even marry him, but it is too much for her to go back into exile. A quiet life with Alceste in the country frightens her as much
as the sheltered marriage in the city that she has recently come from. At the end of the play she states “At twenty, one is terrified of solitude” (150). Harrison uses the same word in his translation; “I’d be terrified” (67). This is a very strong word indicating that love is simply not enough. In French law women of the time were under the control of men, first as daughters and sisters, then as wives and mothers (Kettering 23). Even a peasant woman had more freedom in choosing a husband (28). Only a widow of the time could be in control of her body, her money and her world. Even then, a woman like Célimène needed to disguise her independence or she would be thought of as a dangerous troublemaker in society (22). If Célimène were to marry Alceste she would surrender these powers and her life would once again be under the control of a husband. Perhaps she would realize more than what she was giving up, but she is afraid to find out

Célimène is no tragic figure although it is clear that she is more afraid to make a change than she is to lose her love. Shattered she may be, but this is a comedy and we know that a woman like Célimène will love again. Who knows? Perhaps three weeks of country life will have Alceste running back to her salon. As Éliante points out, her cousin’s “heart’s a stranger to her own emotion. Sometimes it thinks it loves, when no love’s there; at other times it loves quite unaware” (Wilbur 105). According to Crimp, Célimène is a bitch who keeps on partying and Harrison paints her moving from soulful silence to laughter to reflection. Those adaptors impose an ending, but Wilbur, in the spirit of the original, wisely leaves it open for the actor and director to find their way.

Philinte and Éliante are the least drawn characters of this piece. They are the foils of the play and function as Molière’s barometers by which the audience can contrast the excess honesty of Alceste with the excess of dishonesty and falseness of the other characters. The
only thing the script really tells us about Philinte is that his “heart’s most cherished goal is to marry Éliante.” Although he can be described as bland, he is obviously a loyal and trustworthy friend of Alceste’s. He also exhibits the patience of a saint while Alceste is busy storming, ranting and raging against the entire world (Wilbur 152). Alceste describes him as a “matchless reasoner” (133). In Crimp’s adaptation Philinte becomes John but the character remains the same loyal and patient kind of friend and a most likable character.

Éliante is the other character we should heed as she also exemplifies the middle ground that Molière wants us to admire. As Richard Wilbur tells us, “Honest Éliante is the one we are most to trust.” (7) Although she may not possess the razor wit or the drop-dead beauty of her cousin Célimène, Molière draws her with elegance, dignity and a quiet grace. We know that Philinte is in love with her, but he knows he has only second place in her heart and tells her that if Alceste does not return her affections that he “hopes to see [her] gracious favour pass from [Alceste] to [him]” (106). Although he has a romantic streak, Philinte is very much a realist and foreshadows Alceste’s abrupt and bizarre Act IV proposal to Éliante by telling him, that Éliante’s “honest heart, which cares for you alone would harmonize far better with your own” (289). Philinte seems to be a sort of Paul Rudd to Alceste’s George Clooney and Éliante a kind of Olivia De Havilland’s Melanie to Célimène’s Scarlett O’Hara as played by Vivian Leigh. In Crimp’s modernization Éliante is presented as Ellen, and the character is fleshed out very nicely as “a celebrity post-feminist journalist” (Crimp14), but in a very different way than the Éliante that Molière had drawn. In this version she notably states that she does not find Alceste “remotely attractive” (64). Actress Michelle Giroux played this role to excellent personal reviews in the Tarragon production. She shares that her approach to the role was to portray Éliante as a buttoned down Annie Liebovitz kind of gal
costumed in sensible cords and fashionable but flat suede boots, who, later in the play, literally let her hair down, threw away her glasses and had a “snog” with John after the party scene created by the director, commencing after Crimp’s last line of the play (Interview with Michelle Giroux). Both Crimp and director chose to stray very far from the original Molière (and Wilbur) ending, where Philinte calls upon Éliante to join him and go after their unhappy friend Alceste. To serve Molière these two need to be presented as parallel characters that illustrate and represent his examination of moderation, as evidenced by the fact that he makes us laugh at all of the extreme players, but never at Éliante or Philinte.

Oronte is presented as a very well connected and respected man. He tells Alceste that he has the ear of the king and that he is “much in favour with the throne”. Alceste describes his rival, if we are to believe he is truly speaking frankly, as “noble, brave and virtuous” (Wilbur 103). and a man of “high and courtly reputation” (39). Whatever the true virtues of the man, we do know one thing for certain and that is that Oronte is a horrific poet. A successful production of The Misanthrope will find the audience positively in stitches during the reading of his precious ode to fair Phyllis. Crimp is less successful with his adaptation where the character becomes Covington, a vain theatre critic and would-be playwright with a bad script for Jennifer. This is a problematic characterization of Oronte compared with Molière’s original. The Oronte of Molière is no mere fool like a modern day Mike Sorrentino (aka The Situation from reality TV show The Jersey Shore) with his Oronte-esque new book on tanning, t-shirts and “creeping on chicks”. He is rather a respected person who has truly made his mark in one thing but proves to be horribly bad at another. Think William Shatner releasing an album of song, or the public humiliation that Grammy award winning singer Michael Bolton was subject to when he appeared as a contestant on Dancing with the
Stars.

The characters of Clitandre and Acaste are delightful creations and offer comedic highlights in any good production of *The Misanthrope*. Acaste is written as a smarter, perhaps slightly older character, and Clitandre is more of the sidekick. Célimène seems to love the fact that these gentlemen worship her but she also informs Alceste that she considers Acaste a “dreadful pest” and “a chartered gossip of the court who can do you harm” (Wilbur 55, 56). She insinuates that she must receive him because it could be dangerous to alienate him. In Harrison’s translation he uses even stronger terms and has her stating that such men “draw blood” and that “falling foul of that set is suicide” (19). Since this is a comedy I think we can take some of this language with a grain of salt and decide she is speaking of the death of her social, not actual life. It does indicate that even if these men are not seen as legitimate suitors for Célimène’s hand, they must be seen as a serious threat to her social position and reputation were she to fall from their favour.

Physically, the script indicates that the characters of Acaste and Clitandre could be cast smaller and slighter than the other three leading men. Célimène is quoted to describe Acaste as the “little Marquess” (Wilbur 142), yet Harrison translates the passage to read “Your little hanger-on Clitandre” (64). In any case, it also serves Molière to have them both be literally seen as the lesser rivals. They certainly do not come across as serious suitors in Crimp’s version in which the original marquises are now presented as marquee names; Julian, a rich playboy former child-star actor, and older powerful lecherous agent, Alexander. These “pet celebrities” (Crimp 33) appear to have no real desire or feelings for Jennifer (Célimène) except their competition to bed her, and the desire to be connected to the hot new flavour du jour. Molière successfully met the difficult challenge of making his audience of court nobles
laugh at themselves. Crimp takes these characters to a darker and more cynical place that is not in that spirit in which they were written.

Acaste informs us that he is “young and rich” and “of exalted pedigree”. By his own estimation, he possesses “wit [and] taste”, and is “clever, handsome, gracefully polite; [his] waist is small [his] teeth are strong and white” (Wilbur 80). Alceste rails about Clitandre and comments on his “giggle and falsetto voice” and tells us he affects a “long nail on his little finger, embroidered hose, ribbons and bows” (50) and a blonde wig. In our time, with that kind of descriptive information an inexperienced director might make a choice to play these characters as stereotypically gay. It is an understandable pitfall that is not a good choice. If one carefully looks at the history of the time and translates the fashion-sense, one realizes that it actually can be more amusing to an audience and more in keeping with Molière’s intent to have very “straight” men trying desperately to be fashionable when in fact it is not inherently part of their character. We can all relate to having a good snicker over someone we’ve seen trying to look a little younger or embracing some modern fashion that is not right for them. For modern examples think men with bad perms or toupees, men in platform shoes or leg warmers, or modern metrosexuals sporting a murse (male purse) or a snatchel (shoulder bag for a laptop).

Arsinoé is positively seething with jealousy towards Célimène and lust for Alceste which she attempts to hide behind a most respectable demeanor. In the Wilbur translation she is referred to as “Arsinoé the prude” by Philinte (27), and as “dreadfully prudish” by Acaste (85). Célimène informs us that “Her poor success in snaring men explains her prudishness” (86), and refers to her as “The creature” (85). If we are to believe our leading lady, she further describes Arsinoé as a “stupid, vicious and arrogant” woman who deports
herself with “bustling zeal, grave demeanor and towering self-esteem” (86). We learn that despite Arsinoé’s pious pose, she still paints her face and that she would very much like to have a lover, her first choice being Alceste. If Célimène is our Lady Gaga of this world, then Arsinoé is our Madonna; older, bitchier, trying desperately to compete with the younger woman. Arsinoé is not so au courant anymore, her attempts at fashion still get her in the paper, but on the worst-dressed list, her admirers are B-list and she’s now waiting in lines and is no longer getting admitted to the VIP rooms. The scenes with the two women are a delight for both the actresses and the audience when the right blend of subtext is added to the verbal sword play between the new desirable toast of the town and the been-around-the-block woman who is desperately trying to hang on to some celebrity status. Crimp transforms Arsinoé into Marcia the acting teacher of Célimène/Jennifer, who positively drips venom and jealousy over the world wide commercial success and fame that her former student is enjoying. He draws her even older than Molière infers, as indicated when Jennifer calls her “middle aged” (Crimp 55), and Marcia replies “What makes you think I am old enough to be your mother?” (56). Once again, Crimp distorts Molière by writing her to be too old to be considered a true rival, and he presents Marcia’s jealousy more as professional sour grapes than Arsinoé’s original very personal high stakes of coveting Célimène’s good looks and good men.

The character of Dubois (patient, yet dim witted) is the antithesis of his master (impatient and quick-witted). Perhaps Molière wrote this role of Alceste’s valet for a specific actor in his troupe. This thought is supported by some scholars who say that Molière “wrote for his cast, to display his actors abilities, and minimize their shortcomings” (Bishop xi). Or perhaps this scene was inserted as a device to remind the audience that this is a
comedy. The odd and challenging ending is coming soon and they need to know it’s okay to laugh! This scene is an oddity, yet a director should be loath to cut it as it contains plot information to make sense of a later scene about Alceste’s lawsuit. We must also note carefully that arrest and lawsuits were not to be taken lightly in Molière’s time. The rich and powerful attorney general Fouquet was arrested in 1661, the ensuing trial lasted three years and he was subsequently imprisoned in the fortress of Pignerol where he died in 1680 (Briggs 144). The other minor characters are the servant Basque who is required mostly to announce our characters, and the Guard who is required to move the plot along.

The most important observation about the themes and characters of *The Misanthrope* is to note that the characters are forever memorable and that they, and the play’s themes, are universal. When speaking about putting these characters to the test for universality, W.D. Howarth in his detailed study of Molière concludes that “there is convincing proof that these characters possess some quality or other that transcends the boundaries of time and place” (Howarth 252). This notion is supported by noted scholar L. J. Potts who, when speaking to the topic of classical comedy writes that the ideas may speak to a “small class living together in a small area, or extended to the whole of humanity” (256).

But how did I first get acquainted with Molière, and why was it my choice to produce the Wilbur translation of *The Misanthrope* for my MFA thesis play at UBC in 1981? Chapter 3 will address these questions, and reconstruct how I unlocked the universality of the characters and themes for that production.
Chapter 3. The Misanthrope 1981

The art and craft of theatrical staging are articulated in wonderful detail by William Ball in his book “A Sense of Direction” where he offers a series of practical techniques for directors to follow. Ball was the founder and long-time general director of the acclaimed American Conservatory Theatre. Although this book was published after my 1981 production, I will make reference to his pre-production vocabulary in this chapter, and then expand and closely build upon his principals in Chapter 4, where I will fulsomely detail my plans for a 2012 production of The Misanthrope.

I first met Molière in 1974 in my third year of training at the Bachelor of Fine Arts Acting program at the University of Alberta. It was our “styles” year and top industry professionals were brought in to share their love and their wealth of knowledge of the classics. Powys Thomas from Stratford gave us all a new respect and affection for the “Bard”, Hutchison Shandro was our guide to Restoration Theatre, and Don Davis was our muse for Molière.

Donald George Davis was a Canadian theatre pioneer who was the co-founder of the Crest Theatre in Toronto, and a classical veteran of Canada’s Stratford Festival and the USA’s Stratford, the American Shakespeare Theatre. Besides being a director, he also had a distinguished acting career in which he had performed leading roles on stage opposite such stars as Irene Worth, Elaine Stritch and Katherine Hepburn. Mr. Davis won an Obie Award for portraying the title role in New York’s North American premiere of Samuel Beckett’s Krapp’s Last Tape. He was well respected as a Molière expert and had notably performed the leading role of Orgon in Tartuffe at numerous theatres including Stratford and the
National Arts Centre (Breon). We studied and subsequently performed the Richard Wilbur translation of *The Misanthrope* as our end of term project in the Thrust Theatre at the University of Alberta. We were spellbound as Davis illustrated to us how to bring the verse to life, his script waving in hand for emphasis as his plus sized frame in a bright velour jumpsuit, (remember, it was the seventies!), positively glided about the stage as a most memorable Célimène. We performed the play from a purely classical point of view and I am sure Mr. Davis would have considered it sacrilege for it to have been performed in any other way. It was only in later years that I became aware of the ways in which the universality of the characters and themes could also support a “modern” production of the play. I graduated with my BFA in Acting from the University of Alberta in 1975 and worked professionally for the next few years with such companies as the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton, Carousel Theatre in Vancouver and the Western Canada Theatre in Kamloops. I had developed a keen interest in directing and in 1980 was delighted to find that I had been accepted into the MFA Directing program at UBC. In 1981 I found it very difficult decision to choose a thesis production. After examining countless plays I decided to return to an “old friend” and present the Richard Wilbur translation of *The Misanthrope*.

My thesis production of *The Misanthrope* was performed in the Dorothy Somerset Theatre in the fall of 1981. My goal was to make the young UBC audiences feel they were seeing a new and timely work. Although I chose to return to the traditional Richard Wilbur translation of the play, I determined I would present it with a modern look as I was inspired by the current “New Romantics” movement of music and fashion that was in full blossom and, in fact, referenced and revived the fashion of the court of Louis XIV. The New Romantic “scene” seemed to provide a perfect contemporary microcosmic parallel to
Molière’s world and provide support to Potts’ assertion that the themes of classic comedy could speak to a “small class living together in a small area, or extended to the whole of humanity” (Howarth 256).

The movement came from Britain where, according to Observer journalist David Johnson, the “Blitz-kids” popularized bands like Spandau Ballet, Visage and Duran Duran. In dandified regency designs they would dance the night away at London clubs The Blitz and the Saint Moritz (the recognized venues where the Romantic Movement started) in what has been described as an “eye-stopping collage” featuring “posers in wondrous ensembles, emphatic makeup and in-flight haircuts. Here was Lady Ample Eyefull, there Sir Gesting Smartfellow, lads in breeches, with frilly shirts, white stockings and ballet pumps” (Johnson). In Vancouver we wore flamboyant theatrical brocade with lots of frills and puffed sleeves and hit the Luv Affair on Seymour Street.

In my production the music, make-up, hair and clothing style was brought from the clubs to the stage and then married to the language of Molière via Wilbur. King Louis XIV became my David Bowie, aka the “Thin White Duke”. The court was The Blitz and, as in the days of Versailles, the king’s nobles would try and outdo everyone else and dress up as art objects to present themselves at court. Acaste and Clitandre-like subjects with “painted faces, frilly shirts and velvet breeches”, lined up “trying to wangle their way in to the presence” (Rimmer 14) of King Bowie- to seek his twentieth century version of royal patronage- the chance to be plucked out of the crowd and chosen to appear in his latest video. In fact, Bowie actually did venture to The Blitz one evening to scout for talent and asked Steve Strange “how would he like to appear in the video for my new single Ashes to Ashes” (14), and could he please find three other extras and be outside the Hilton at six the next
morning. Dave Rimmer notes that Strange could have found three hundred just by “starting a Chinese whisper” (14).

In place of the word “style”, William Ball champions using the phrase “world of the play”. He wisely advises a director to use this to define the limits of a play, in the same way a frame defines the limits of a painting. A successful director will then be able to create a harmonious world that Ball describes as “very specific and connotative” (Ball 30). In my 1981 Wilbur production the world of the play was created by marrying the costumes of the court of Louis XIV with the current fashion and music of the New Romantics movement. The excess and elegance of the mid seventeenth century was seamlessly transferred to the corresponding elegance and excess of the twentieth century. Ball suggests that at special moments, one can “introduce one triumphant difference, which can be very dramatic” as long as the audience has been prepared to “unconsciously expect the difference and accept it with satisfaction” (31). This was realized in my production by adding musical numbers of New Romantic groups that were choreographed to advance and illuminate the themes and characters of The Misanthrope.

Ball further explains that in creating “the World of the Play” the director must create a pattern of “systems” (32), to ensure the heart of the play will most clearly be revealed. To make my Molière most accessible to my largely student audience, I concentrated on the aforementioned world of time travel and blending the fashion and music to illuminate Molière, while protecting the integrity of the play by not changing the Wilbur translation.

I was most fortunate in the casting of my production. I wanted a young cast, yet I needed actors who had both classical and voice “chops”. I had an obligation to use some
UBC Theatre students but I also threw in some “ringers”. A host of old University of Alberta comrades had, like me, relocated to Vancouver and I was delighted to have some of these talented classically trained actors come on board. Through the courtesy of Canadian Actor Equity Association I was able to cast my three leads with professionals. Alceste was played by the wonderfully appropriate Rick Stojan, a true modern day misanthrope. The beautiful Alison Davies and her musical voice proved to be a charming Célimène, and the very formidable and funny Sharon Wahl was my Arsinöé. Vancouver actor Rory Mandryck played Philinte opposite another Edmonton U of A transplant, Jennifer Walker as Éliante. They were supported by British actor Greg Kramer (Acaste) and talented UBC students Brent Alston (Oronte) and Bob Twaites (Clitandre). Two UBC women, Kim Falconer and Pam Jones, rounded out the cast as dancers/maids and the specific roles of Basque (who we cheekily renamed “Basquette”), the Guard and Dubois. My cast in 1982 was all under 30, a wonderful diverse group that I believed would translate Molière well to our mostly student audience.

My good fortune continued when Don S. Davis came on my team as the set designer. Davis, who sadly died in 2008, was best known as an actor, most notably in television as General George Hammond in the long running series *Stargate SG1*, and as Major Garland Briggs in the Cult hit *Twin Peaks*. He was also well known as a painter, sculptor and carver. However, in the early 1980’s, Mr. Davis was working and teaching in the technical theatre program at UBC, where in the fall of 1981 he was assigned to design my production of *The Misanthrope*. We created a modified arena seating with a raised proscenium for Célimène's apartment and an adjacent rectangular floor area for any other locations. The audience was therefore seated on risers on three sides of the floor stage. Entry from the floor to chez
Célimène was from a stage right door or from steps coming up from the floor stage to the proscenium. Célimène’s salon was stark, simple, ultramodern, yet with lots of curves in arched doors, wall accents and a two-person rounded window seat. A large art piece of a neon pink flamingo was the star of the room and would bring the stage alive as a pre-set and an entre act transition piece.

The set pieces, including a fabulous chaise for Célimène’s *home-base-come-throne*, were on loan from Ikea and were chosen with care to also be spare and simple. The colors were all beige neutrals to better set off the vibrant colors of the costumes which were created by UBC student Lily Yuen, who went on to a professional career in this field. Alceste sported a store bought conservative suit, Philinte and Éliante were conservative, yet stylish in soft greys. She wore a below the knee dress with a white ruffle at the throat and he sported slacks and white shirt and tie. Célimène’s gowns were red carpet works of art. She entered in gold lame and ruffles cut to the naval with an eight-foot train. A personal hair-dresser stood by backstage to transfer her three foot high masterpiece of hair from Act 1 into an off the shoulder down look for Act 2. In the latter part of the show her gown was a brilliant red accented with yards of white ostrich. In contrast Arsinoé wore the lesser metal of silver and was costumed to look like she was trying a bit too hard. She was styled to be bigger, older, the ruffles were a bit too much, and the hair was teased and tortured within an inch of its life. Think a Christian conservative Tammy Faye Baker type, in contrast to the true style of Célimène. Our leading ladies were both dressed over the top but one of them would be on the “Best Dressed List”, the other featured on the “What Was She Thinking” page. The rest of the uber-hip characters were all stylish in custom hair by cutting edge hair salon Suki’s, David Bowie-ish make up designed by Jerry Johima and outfitted in black heels or black
boots and black fitted short skirts or skin tight black jeans. Oronte, Acaste and Clitandre all wore show-stopping jackets created by Ms. Yuen. She took stock costume pieces from past UBC classical productions of the period, recut them to the naval to expose handsome chests and added modern details to showcase these characters as having one foot firmly in 1666 and the other in a hip alternative club of 1981.

Lighting design was by UBC’s Cameron Mitchell and contrasted moody street scenes with the dazzle of chez Célimène. In addition, the benches built around the three sides of the floor stage came alive in the musical numbers with different colored lights pulsing through the Plexiglas to turn the theatre into a night-club setting.

I did not change a word of Wilbur’s translation. However I did add four musical numbers to the production. Choreographer Faye Cohen assisted me in staging a grand opening number, spectacular entrance pieces for both Célimène and Arsinoé, and a finale of a curtain call. The opening sequence was a dreamlike club setting with muted lighting and smoke machine special effects set to the music of New Romantics group Spandau Ballet. Six of the cast in masks performed elaborate patterns on the forestage partnered with costumed mannequins on wheels. The audience was immediately transported into a world of decadence and elegance as the interactions of the cast echoed the timeless shallowness and social games of society. Alceste was directed to be having a miserable time in the midst of all this nightclub falseness, fashion and excess. The number concluded with Philinte embracing what looked like a long lost friend to have the production segue directly into Act 1 and give visual motivation to Alceste’s opening lines of disgust that Philinte cannot even name the man that he has just warmly embraced.
The Act 2 entrance of Célimène featured Clitandre and Acaste and two women playing maids/dancers entering on to the forestage pushing a cut-out limousine on wheels to the pounding sound of a current club hit. *I Only Want to Be with You* was a 1979 cover version of the song that had launched Dusty Springfield’s career in the swinging sixties. This remake was by *The Tourists*, the *new-wave-come-pop* lead vocals by Annie Lennox who would later come to fame as one half of *The Eurythmics*. The message in the choreography was established as the limo swung around and revealed our gorgeous Célimène in her gold lame posing at the top of the staircase that was the back of the limo. Our audience was immediately able to identify our show’s leading lady and the musical number illuminated the relationships that Molière had created. The fawning and worshiping of Célimène’s admirers therefore powered Alceste right into his opening lines of Act 2 as he exclaimed “I confess your conduct gives me infinite distress” (Wilbur 49).

Arsinoé’s first entrance echoed that of our leading lady’s. Had budget allowed for two vehicles I would have chosen for her to arrive in a lesser one than Célimène’s. Arsinoé notes that she travels by “coach” (Wilbur 96). It would have been very funny to have played this translation as coach, as opposed to first class, and have her arrive in a kind of bus or minivan, but in this production we used the same vehicle and relied on the music, wardrobe and attitude of her fellow actors to make the directorial point that she was not as celebrated, as popular or as fashionable as her rival. While Célimène had been fawned over and celebrated, Arsinoé’s attendants were directed to “work to rule” and share their indifference and dislike of their employer to the audience. After all, Arsinoé is accused to her face by Célimène that “She beats her maids and cheats them of their pay” (90). Actor Sharon Wahl was fabulous in this role and by the end of the musical number the audience could not wait to
have this character open her mouth. Once again they had enjoyed a delightful preview of what was to come in the script and were set up to enjoy the encounter of these two formidable women in a scene that can prove to be a highlight of any translation, in any production. To further contrast our leading ladies Arsinoé entered to the original version of *I Only Want to Be with You*. Although this had been a Top Ten hit for Dusty Springfield in 1964, my directorial point was that it was now 1981 and this song was old fashioned. Annie Lennox was the hip new style maven and poor Dusty was, like our Arsinoé, fading into obscurity. We even slowed down the song at one point to *slow-mo* to highlight that although hugely entertaining, everything was a bit “off” in this number when contrasted with the hip, worshipful entrance of Célimène.

The curtain call was set to the music of David Bowie’s *Fashion* from his hit 1980 album *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*, RCA records, and was in fact choreographed with the cast strutting like runway models and competing for the cheers of the audience. Alceste’s awkward attempt to work the catwalk always created a guaranteed burst of laughter and applause to set up the final group bow. The finale music and choreography was a wonderful way for the audience to revisit the characters they had enjoyed during the evening, and to physically reference both the themes and their timelessness as Bowie sang “*People from good homes are talking this year...oh bop...fashion...it’s loud and it’s clear and I’ve heard it before*”. Most importantly our character-driven staging reminded our audience that, after all was said and done, this play was in fact a comedy!

My MFA production of *The Misanthrope* ran seven performances October 12 to 17, 1981 in the Dorothy Somerset Theatre. Dorothy Somerset herself attended the October 17th matinee and subsequently wrote a letter to department head Dr. John Brockington in which
she stated how enthused she was to have shared this experience with a sold out student audience who loved the show, found it meaningful to them, and probably were being exposed to Molière for the very first time.

The UBYSSEY review of the show was by Mark Leiren-Young, now an award winning journalist and author. He wrote that “Not many people will see The Misanthrope” and that was “too bad, because it is an enjoyable, dynamic comedy with a lot of style and a lot of flair”. His comment on the costumes were that they were “beautiful and elaborate and gave off the feeling of being in the seventeenth century and the twentieth century simultaneously”. In regard to the added choreography he noted that “the added dance routines serve to further the characterizations and the action. Rather than acting as filler, they serve the plot and make for truly entertaining entrances.” He concluded the review by stating that this production of The Misanthrope was “a flashy and amusing play. It’s refreshing, and it’s well done. And that’s not just idle flattery” (Leiren-Young).

My director’s notes from the 1981 program stated: “Our production of The Misanthrope features the music and style of the New Romantics, whose fashions owe a great deal to the Louis XIV era when the play was written. The philosophy behind this new style of dressing up is perhaps simply that when the world takes a turn for the worse, entertainment, and the more flamboyant the better, enjoys a boom. The country-wide eruption of clubs catering to the New Romantics in England supports this notion. The New Romantics of 1981 are stylish, glamorous and androgynous. Like the fops and gallants of Molière’s time they represent the jet-set dilettantes who dance the night away as the apocalypse approaches” (Lucas).
Directing guru William Ball says a director needs to choose a play that “must excite you” that “fires your imagination”, a play that is “compelling and worthy of attention” (Ball 23, 24). *The Misanthrope* is such a work to me, and having been offered the chance to once again direct the play, I will now detail my plan for a 2012 production with the senior students of Company C at the Canadian College of Performing Arts, aka the CCPA, in Victoria BC. After my examination of other popular versions being performed today, I choose to return to the faithful translation, the musical elegance, the energy and the wondrous sense of comedy in Richard Wilbur’s work. As New York Times critic Jason Zinoman stated in his review of the Pearl Theatre’s production of *The Misanthrope*. “Wilbur, a Pulitzer-prize winning poet doesn’t just believe Molière is funny, he proves it”. Another review of that production proclaimed that Wilbur’s translation is “as scintillating, playful and uproarious as Molière’s original.” (Filipski).

*The Misanthrope* is a great play. I do not want or need to tamper with the still current, universal characters that I have detailed in Chapter 2 but as previously mentioned it is imperative for the director to find the key with which to unlock the play to let modern audiences see why it is still relevant and vital. I believe that “key” is to once again marry the timelessness of the Wilbur translation with elements of current music and design. In his *Critique de l’Ecole des Femmes*, Molière, as translated by Crimp, said “If you don’t make recognizable portraits of the contemporary world, then nothing’s been achieved” (Crimp vi). My mission is to respect and explore the themes of Molière while making my audience feel that human beings have not much changed from 1666 to now.
**World of the Play** - In the presentation of my 1981 Wilbur production, the world of the play was created by marrying the flavour of the court of Louis XIV with the fashions and music of the then current New Romantics movement. The excess and elegance of the mid-seventeenth century was seamlessly transferred to the corresponding excess and elegance of the twentieth century. Ball suggests that at special moments, one can “introduce one triumphant difference, which can be very dramatic” as long as the audience has been prepared to “unconsciously expect the difference and accept it with satisfaction” (31). This was realized in my 1981 production by adding New Romantic musical production numbers that were choreographed to advance and illuminate the themes and characters of *The Misanthrope*. Having experienced the success of this plan, I will repeat it for my 2012 production while updating the fashion, design and music elements to *current club-chic* the like of Gaga, LMFAO and Katy Perry.

The actual characters that Molière was mocking are long forgotten but their gossiping, phoniness, outlandish behaviour and relentless social climbing endure and thrive in our modern world. In the world of Louis XIV the characters sought power and social standing through royal patronage. In the microcosm of the New Romantic scene of the early 80’s, they sought the social cachet that came with the approval of the scene’s mightiest trend-setters (i.e. David Bowie). In the current “Kardashian” world of 2012 the desire for celebrity of any and all kinds is the driving force and the massive network of our electronic/digital media is now the “king” that can bestow this favour. Witness the parents of “balloon boy” who rolled the dice with their child’s life in hope of securing a reality show deal, or former A-list celebrities like Whitney Houston who sold her soul for a reality show in hope of rekindling fame and fortune. Why even modern-day US presidents and other political
leaders seek the patronage of media kings such as Jay Leno or David Letterman and are willing to boost their poll numbers by being ridiculed by “Warrior Princess” Marg Delahunte, aka Mary Walsh, on television’s “22 Minutes.”

Specifically in today’s world of social media whoredom the poster child for “falseness and excess” is Kim Kardashian who has an Acaste-like admirer, Jonathan Cheban, who many think is gay, but is in fact an uber-stylish heterosexual, and who dances attendance on her for everything from a dog walk to a red carpet walk. Many of the current “club kids” and socialites are modern-day Acaste and Clitandre who long to be fashionable, popular, photographed, and to find favour with the celebrities du jour while basking in their limelight. With social media at their immediate disposal, these gadflies can cause great damage in our TMZ tabloid world. Just ask former Democratic congressman Anthony Weiner (political career ends when someone leaks Twitter-pics of his erect “wiener”), Alex Baldwin (humiliated when someone leaks recording of his expletive filled “you rude thoughtless little pig” voicemail to his eleven year old daughter), or supermodel Naomi Campbell (Arsinoé “beats her maids” in the 17th century (Wilbur 90), and in the 21st Ms. Campbell is caught red-handed and pleads guilty to beating her assistant with her Blackberry). The outrageous, celebrity obsessed, and gossip-ridden pop culture of 2012 will provide the new frame for the timeless insincerity and social climbing of Molière’s originals.

**Traditional Form** - Ball advises the director to clearly establish in which traditional form the play lies; for example tragedy, comedy, melodrama, farce, opera, children’s tales etc.” (Ball 26). Ball further suggests that the probable answer will be a combination of two traditions. Although there are certainly serious themes in *The Misanthrope*, it is clear that
that Molière’s intent is that it be presented as a comedy. In my research it was illuminating to discover that Grimarist, a writer of the day, reported that when Molière saw that Parisian audiences were not responding with as much laughter as he wanted, he adjusted the program to open with a broad comedic companion piece to put them in the right frame of mind for *The Misanthrope* (Howarth 42). Grimarist wrote in *Le Registre*, that the result was “On a trouva le Misanthrope bin meilleur, et insensiblement on le prit pour une des meilleurs pièces qui ait jamais paru” (42), or to paraphrase in English, that this made the audience like the play better and it eventually became regarded as one of the best plays ever written. In regard to “form” it is also interesting to note that some critics say that “the formula for the modern Hollywood comedy can be traced to Molière” (Bishop vii).

I will choose satire as the secondary theatrical tradition to highlight the serious themes that are comically explored. Molière’s use of satire speaks through many of the play’s characters as they expose, denounce and deride human folly. The audience needs to laugh both *with* Alceste as he rails about society and its ways, and *at* him when he inadvertently send himself up through the exhibition of his own human failings. My thoughts on this matter are supported by Ben Carlson who played Alceste in the recent Wilbur production at Stratford. Carlson considers the play to be a “comedic experiment” and echoes that “it is imperative that an audience laugh with, and at Alceste, the man who has perfect vision about everyone in the world except himself and Célimène. This play has a very tricky tone; it is not a conventional comedy”. In performance, when lines such as “I’ve been betrayed and wronged”, and about-faces like Alceste’s abrupt proposal to Éliante received laughter, Carlson knew he had successfully communicated the correct traditional form to the audience. He believes that at the end of play “there must be laughter, but sad
laughter. It should not be a dark ending” (Interview with Ben Carlson). His opinion was seconded by his costar Sara Topham who played Célimène in the same production. She wanted the audience to feel sad that the relationship had ended so badly, but stated that at the end of the day, and the end of the play, “the audience must laugh” (Interview with Sara Topham).

**Predominant Element** - Ball advises that the director should determine the “predominant element” of the play (theme, plot, characters, spectacle, and language), well before the start of rehearsals (27). His method is to choose just one predominant element, but to allow a secondary element to surface at appropriate moments. He suggests that even wise directors who take on three elements may risk a “vague and diffuse presentation” although he also notes that “most plays have a bit of all five and a preponderance of one” (29). My predominant element must be language in celebration of the radiant and poetry of both Molière and Wilbur. Sara Topham noted that she loves how Richard Wilbur makes the language come alive, and how it is a gift to an actor that the original taste and texture of his translation both unlocks the true meaning and emotional shape of the original French. She further explains that in other translations it is more difficult for the actor to make an emotional argument when the sentence structure has been altered from the original French. Her expert advice to an actor and director of how to handle this language is clear when she states that “only the most inexperienced actor would pound the poetry” (Interview with Sara Topham).

Both director and actor must be mindful to not allow the rhymed couplets to become sing-song. The play features word play and verbal banter that my production must celebrate
and honour. Actors will know they have achieved success if they are rewarded in the manner of Stratford 2011’s Philinte as reviewed by Richard Ouzounian: “Waspishly elegant, with razor sharp diction, he actually gets a round of applause by simply delivering a speech with true panache” (Ouzounian: The Misanthrope is Stylish but Unsatisfying).

The secondary element needs to be character. Although Molière’s themes are most important in this work, they are best illuminated and reinforced by the rich archetypal characters that Molière has created, which I have detailed in Chapter 2. I will also bravely add flashes of a third element, spectacle; through the character and theme driven musical numbers (a.k.a. the four spectacles) as detailed later in this chapter.

**Metaphor** - Ball champions the concept of having a “metaphor” for the production (33). He states there must be only one metaphor, a painting or a photograph and/or a phrase that most clearly symbolizes the entire concept of the play. Ball states that this limitation fires creativity and ultimately provides the production with greater punch, clarity, meaning, unity, imagination, vigor, wit, power and invention” (36). The photographic image that symbolizes my concept of the play is a picture of conservative, socially conscious, buttoned down Anderson Cooper interviewing the young, wildly garbed, wildly liberated, progressive artist Lady Gaga. This image points to the parallel between Alceste’s love for Célimène and is reminiscent of the incongruity of the marriage of Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe. My metaphor for this play is the phrase “Social critic falls for social butterfly”.

**Systems** - Ball further explains that in creating the world of the play the director must create a pattern of “systems” to ensure “the heart of the play will most clearly be revealed” and to “make it most accessible to the audience” (32). To reach my largely student audience, I will,
again, concentrate on the aforementioned time travel to blend both worlds with the use of modern fashion and music to illuminate Molière, while protecting the integrity of the play by not changing a word of the Wilbur translation.

**Auditions/Casting** - Ball makes the statement that “Casting is the major decision that a director makes” (37). My “major decision” is that my cast will be young. We can enjoy and excuse a thirty-ish Alceste for his self-righteousness and bad behaviour. If he is played forty, twice the age that Molière has written Célimène and perhaps even referenced by his own marriage to Armande Bejart who was half his age (Bishop ix), his actions become less excusable and perhaps even a little creepy and distancing for the audience. Arsinoé should play older, and the rest of the cast should appear to be in their twenties. I love the incongruity of a stunning talented and highly articulate Célimène to appear to in fact be only twenty. It would be folly to try and present the play with students who have not had some solid voice training, and fortunately my 2012 cast of senior CCPA actors have completed two years of theatrical voice and speech from noted teacher and author Dr. Iris MacGregor Bannerman.

Célimène will be cast to resemble the pop star Lady Gaga. The successful actress in this role will pull off both wicked and likable. Does she really manipulate Alceste and then crush him? Or is she merely an incurable flirt who loves him, yet has no desire to settle down again at her age. Célimène will be playing opposite a handsome Alceste who will resemble a younger Conservative Defense Minister Peter MacKay. He should be sexy, in a Clark Kent kind of way. As to Alceste’s age, I believe it works best to have him appear to be the oldest player in our cast (with Arsinoé), without slipping in to the next generation. This supports
the idea of him being tired of the games and follies of his own past youth, now being exhibited by characters like Acaste and Clitandre. This idea also supports the universal/archetypal theme of an older, yet not age inappropriate person in love with younger person who is still busy sowing their oats. If presented and played as such I believe it will, as per aforementioned “world of the play”, “heighten the playwright’s ideas most clearly and make them most assessable to the audience” (Ball 32).

Oronte should be cast be no older, but taller and/or more muscular than Alceste and appear to be a good looking, most successful man who, unlike Clitandre and Acaste, could be a serious rival for the hand of Célimène. As in Greek mythology, the same goes for comedy: the higher they fly…the mightier, and funnier, the fall. Arsinoé will be portrayed as the older, bitchier Madonna-ish type as reflected by the real-life pop culture feud with Madonna, accusing the young upstart of copying her 1989 “Express Yourself” with 2010’s “Born This Way”.

I want the cast to be a mix of distinctive personalities and interesting physical types. To further appeal to a modern young Canadian audience I will cast all the roles in a color-blind manner with an array of skin tones and sounds that reflect both our modern multicultural society and Molière’s timeless themes. The students of the CCPA include young actors that are First Nations, Québécois and Canadians of African, Korean, Pilipino, Latin American and European descent. Perfect! The Guard and Dubois will be doubled by a woman who will also be one of the MTV type dancers in the musical numbers/spectacles and I will, once again, have Basque become Basquette who will double as the French maid and the second MTV dancer.
Text – In preparation for a new production of *The Misanthrope* I have read the script many times in many ways. I have consciously read it for specific character information, for clues from the playwright, for staging and design notes, and to apply the principals of William Ball in regard to the predominant element, form, metaphor, systems and world of the play. I also find it crucial to step back and simply read the play for pure enjoyment to recall the essence that my audience will want to enjoy. During this preparation time, I must also face the challenge of choosing where to place the intermission in this five act play. Ball wisely suggests that “the deciding factor is usually the relationship between the weight of the material and the time it takes to unfold” (94). I will present the play in two acts and plan for one intermission at the conclusion of the line “Arsinoé you say? Oh dear!” (Wilbur 85). The beginning of my Act 2 will then open with *Spectacle #3*, the entrance of Arsinoé. After the musical number, a few opening lines of Act 3 scene 3 will be repeated before we move into the meat of the scene. I find the five act play to be front-loaded with three rollercoaster acts of audience pleasing characters and situations. Although the writing continues to be strong, Molière’s puts the brakes on in Act IV and V as he moves towards the denouement of the piece. By placing the intermission thusly, I have split the five act play into two halves, saved the very strong Arsinoé scenes for post intermission, and have further balanced the evening by having two spectacles in each of my two acts.

My pre-rehearsal preparation includes deciding whether I will cut any dialogue. I am in complete agreement with Ball’s notion that the cast must not sit at a first rehearsal crossing out lines or speeches that they may have become attached to. If this production were professional, I would not cut a line of the Wilbur translation. Since this is a student production I will judiciously cut some of the longer speeches. A third year acting student is
not as vocally or dramatically adept to serve a long Molière monologue as a Stratford veteran, and my audience will, in all probability, not be as savvy as a Stratford crowd. I will follow Ball’s advice by issuing only the revised script to the cast, and well in advance of the first rehearsal.

An uncut version of the play should run approximately two hours and ten minutes. My four musical numbers/spectacles, to be detailed later in this chapter, will add approximately 12-14 minutes to the production and my goal is to present an evening that is, including intermission, no longer than 2 1/2 hours in length. I will therefore make approximately 10-12 minutes of careful cuts to the script, remaining mindful of Ball’s statement that the reason to cut is to make the play more “trim, stage worthy and clear” (99).

**Design** – All of my design elements will focus on supporting the play’s predominant elements of language and character. The costumes, like the characters, will range from uber-fashionable to uber-conservative. Célimène will first appear in full-on-pop star 2012 MTV Awards glamour. Imagine head pieces, meat dresses, wearable art, elaborate make up, and the wildest in haute couture. Alceste will present as a sexy grown up intellectual Harry Potter type, perhaps with glasses, in need of a haircut, scuffed serviceable shoes, a tie with a stain on it, and a suit right off a Sears warehouse store rack. Acaste and Clitandre will be “2012 club-kid chic” in full on Kardashian-Melrose-iPhone-iPad-garb-du-jour as they blog, text and tweet about their own notability, influence and fashion forwardness. (New York writer Michael Musto, defines the modern club kid as a member of a “cult of crazy fashion and petulance…terminally superficial…master manipulators…exploiters…and partiers.”). Oronte will be dressed at the height of fashion, without being over the top, perhaps in an
H&M suit. Éliante and Philinte will sport fashionable, yet quieter complimentary colors that look “off the rack” tasteful in Holt Renfrew or Burberry brands. They are our middle-of the road characters so we are able to contrast the excesses of both the uber-fashionable Marquesses and the out-of-fashion Alceste. Arsinoé will be a joy of a “train wreck” as she tries to keep up with the Célimènes’ of the world…maybe her hat is too big, her dress too tight, too short, or her heels too high. Or perhaps I will choose to have her entrance echo Madonna’s iconic 1990 “Vogue” look, in which she was dressed in full on court garb of Louis XIX. In any case what must be fashion referenced is that she is trying hard, but not keeping up with the new youthful looks as evidenced by Madonna’s 2012 attempt to be au courant resulting in her MDNA album debuting at #1 and then setting a world record for tanking 88% in one week (Makarechi). As in the Parisian 1660’s the fashions of my 2012 production are meant to dazzle and explode.

In the four musical numbers/spectacles of the show, the lighting will erupt into the Ball-defined “triumphant difference” (31), my world of MTV/Music video full of color, projections and effects. The setting will echo the spirit of the lighting. I envision a backdrop/scrim on which projections will neutrally frame the forestage for the dialogue scenes. It will then become a riot of color and effects for the musical spectacles. I want the backdrop to be framed by hundreds of yards of hanging white tulle, which at dramatic times in the show can be ripped down or drawn like curtains to reveal Célimène’s salon. The salon will be a raised platform on wheels which will move in and out of the centre stage action as required so we can transition effortlessly from concert stage, to dance floor, to street scene to salon. The raised salon will not have walls, it will be dressed with the same tulle fabric and will have a stage right fixed door frame, a stage left window including a window seat for
two, and a rear centre art piece hung over to a fixed long, narrow serving table. At centre stage will be the one furniture piece, Célimène’s grand chaise where she can be artfully surrounded by her admirers.

**Sound/Music/Choreography** - There will be four musical numbers/spectacles added to the text. Many of the CCPA students are extremely talented singers and dancers so some of the planning will need to be done after casting is complete. For example if my Célimène is an amazing hip hop dancer, she may perform a dance number and lip sync the lyrics. If she is one of the top pop vocalists, I will have her sing live and the company will perform the choreography behind her.

**Preshow** – The audience enters to the mid seventeenth century classical music sounds of Isis, Overture and First Aria by Molière’s collaborator, J.B. Lully. At curtain time our two “dancers” enter in Louis XIV garb and proceed to do the pre-show “no cell phones, texting or photographs” in verse, something that I personally will write to the effect of, “If we see your face by the light of your blackberry screen, your head will shortly rest on our guillotine. We’ll pull the rope, we’ll chop your head, it won’t be just your phone that’s dead. So sit back my dears, pull up a chair and we’ll be happy to share the genius of Monsieur Molière.” Then in the spirit of Ball’s “one triumphant difference” (31), we will explode into the music and fashion of 2012 and Spectacle #1.

**Spectacle #1** - The opening of the show is set in Vegas style *Club Lavo* and features the entire cast excluding Célimène. Everyone except Alceste and Philinte will perform in masks, reminiscent of Louis XIV to reference the historical aspect of the piece, but to not yet be identified as the characters they will later become. The song may be “Moves like Jagger” or
it may be replaced by a new 2012 club anthem. The choreography will exhibit the falseness of the club society, illuminate that Alceste does not fit in this world, and will conclude with Alceste’s rage initiated by the fact that Philinte has ignored him to exuberantly engage and embrace someone that he does not even know! This physical action moves right into the energy and dialogue of Philinte’s opening lines of the play; “Now, what’s got into you?” (Wilbur 15).

**Spectacle #2** - The entrance of Célimène pre Act 2 will be to Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way”. Entire cast will be choreographed (minus Arsinoé) with Alceste looking on in a combination of lust and disgust. At the end of the number he escorts her to her salon/dressing room which leads us right in to Alceste’s opening dialogue of Act 2; “Shall I speak plainly madam?”, followed by her response that it seems he has kindly saw her home/backstage “so as to pour invectives in my ear” (Wilbur 49).

**Spectacle #3** - The entrance of Arsinoé will mirror that of Célimène's, but instead of the worshipful idolatry that Célimène received, the audience will enjoy seeing that her back up dancers obviously can’t stand her. Song choice will be either the very funny parody version of “Born This Way” called “I Perform this Way”, or I may choose to clearly reference the older/younger current pop culture Gaga/Madonna feud and have her enter to “Express Yourself” or “Vogue” in the iconic MTV awards performance Louis XIV costumes. Both choices would be crowd pleasers and will illuminate the character of Arsinoé before she opens her mouth.

**Spectacle #4** - The finale/curtain call in my original production was an audience highlight and I look forward to repeating the idea. The cast will perform the first part as their
characters in choreographed sequences of being supermodels on the runway, including Alceste awkwardly strutting his stuff. Then they will break from their characters, and as actors take their bows in a traditional curtain call. I may choose to use David Bowie’s “Fashion” again as it remains such a “cool” and lyric appropriate song, but if it dates the production in any way or takes us out of the world of the play; I will find a good 2012 selection as a replacement.

If challenged on my choice of my updated elements, my response would be to reference William Ball, who tells directors to look at the archetypal rules by which you can telegraph to your audience who the characters are and what the theme is. Many in my audience will have the challenge of getting used to verse, so these sound and visual elements of lighting, costume, setting, music and choreography will be a speed-date to make the play more meaningful, accessible and relatable.

**Rehearsal** - The first reading of the play will be around the table and it will be stressed that we are reading for the sense of the piece, not to see a performance. Because the predominant element of this play is language, at the table is exactly where we will stay for a few days until the actors are confident and comfortable with the poetry of Molière and Wilbur. This is also the time to talk about how the spectacles will work with the text and to determine the exact pronunciations we will use in the play. The cast will be directed that the names should be pronounced in a fashion that is roughly French, without nasal and uvular agonies. Damon should be dah-MOAN and for rhymed convenience Arsinoé should be ar-SIN-oh-eh.

I am in agreement with all of Ball’s very sensible suggestions about blocking. I am a firm believer that actors should sit at the table until they understand the text, what they are
saying, and to whom. Before putting the play on its feet, I will also review the model and/or floor plan and have the cast walk the taped rehearsal floor, play with the rehearsal furniture and props and ensure they are comfortable with the placements of exits and entrances. My preproduction homework will have included a “bible” which contains a complete plan of blocking because as an actor and director, I have experienced that valuable rehearsal time can be wasted by directors who “wing it”. Once the plan is in place, my job as a director is to make the cast feel that the staging is natural and instinctive, and to keep my nose out of my book. I, and my ego need to be always open to change, or to a better idea. The blocking mantra for the text portions of the performance will be, keep it simple and keep it clean as to focus on the predominant elements. Composition and picturization are aspects of blocking. With composition I need to be mindful of the technical requirements of ensuring the audience can clearly see and hear my actors, and that my cast is at one with their settings and props. Once the composition—or base coat—is set, it becomes time to add the more artful layers of color, the picturization in which I will place actors in positions that will reinforce both the text and the relationship of the characters. For example, in Act 2 Célimène will be holding court on her chaise in a power position with her admirers artfully and worshipfully placed around her. All of the characters with the exception of Alceste will be seated; Philinte and Éliante watching the gossip unfold from the window seat, Acaste perched on the heel of her chaise, and Clitandre on the floor at her feet. In Act 5 as she is being confronted and attacked she will again be on her chaise but all the characters will be grouped around her in standing positions, intensifying the tension and turning the tables to reinforce that they are now the stronger.

William Ball follows the teachings of acting guru Constantin Stanislavski who says
one must provide the actor with a “single golden key, a technique that will bring “the multiplicity of impressions into alignment and unity” (Ball 74). This golden key illuminates the characters systems of “wants”, which Ball says will help the “characters move from one objective to another through the course of the script” (81), and he ascertains that these “wants” must be verbs (I want to win, to earn, to find), not nouns (I want money, a job, a present). Ball encourages directors to “use the word objective to refer to the system of wants experienced by the character” (81). He notes that different directors use many different terms, “the goal, the need, what are you doing? What are you playing?” that mean the same thing (80). I heartily endorse the notion that all directors use only the word “objective” to refer to the system of “wants”. That said, when working with professional actors a director must respect that different artists come from diverse schools of thought, and that when working with students it is possible that they have been trained in a specific method that differs from Stanislavski model. In any case, I will be ready to step in with Ball’s clear common language of “wants” and objectives” whenever it is obvious that an actor’s objectives need to be chosen, heightened or upgraded. Whether standing back and respecting different techniques, or imposing a system of technique on actors who are having difficulty, my goal is to help navigate the characters from one objective to another through the script so as to maximise the experience of the play for my audience.

The super-objectives for the players of The Misanthrope are strong and clear for this character driven piece. Alceste wants to dominate Célimène to be her one and only, and to convince the world to change and embrace his “frankness at any cost”. Célimène wants to dominate her world so she can keep her freedom and her social position as the most desirable woman with the most exclusive salon. Philinte wants to reinforce his friendship with Alceste
and to win the heart of Éliante. Éliante initially wants to win the heart of Alceste, but during the course of the play Alceste’s actions cause her to change her mind and elevate Philinte to that place. Arsinoé wants to crush her rival Célimène and knock her off her perch so she can win Alceste and regain her former position of most desirable woman with the most exclusive salon. Oronte wants to dazzle Célimène with his charms and dazzle the world, especially Alceste, with his talent as a writer. Acaste wants to possess Célimène so he can be seen to have conquered the most desirable woman in his society. Clitandre wants to possess Célimène so he can achieve a higher social standing than Acaste.

It is not only the blocking that I must be prepared to change after all my intensive pre-production homework. It is imperative to allow and encourage the creative flow of myself and the actors. As Ball clearly states, “It is an illusion for a director to believe that everything depends on his having figured out everything in advance” (52). The most challenging part of rehearsal will be to apply that principal to the ending of the play. When Alceste goes in to his voluntary exile, are we to side with him? Is he a fool? Does he just need to play the social “game” better? Will he ever? I look forward to exploring this with my cast. I do know how I want my audience to feel, as expressed by Stratford’s Célimène, Sara Topham. She shared with me that an audience member told her “I have seen The Misanthrope seven or eight times and I never understood the ending before. I felt like crying, but could not help myself from laughing” (Interview with Sarah Topham).

Whether 1666 or 2012, our world is, and always has been a world of extremes; there is the right, the left and the middle is often ignored. Alceste’s overwhelming need to be right makes it impossible for him to be happy. Moliere’s lesson to us is that true happiness requires acceptance of, and compromise with, our fellows. I want the audience to re-examine
if they might find more peace of mind through moderation: Do I really want to be right, or would I rather be happy?

In 2012 Alceste still has a lot to be pissed off about! Whether it is 1666 Parisian audiences watching Célimène holding court in her salon, or 2012 world-wide audiences watching American Kim Kardashian holding court on the “E” Network, society is full of unjust judges, corrupt politicians, social games, vanity and sexual hypocrisy. In any age, audiences will be enlightened, entertained, and hopefully moved by Molière’s examination of the human condition as they watch what happens when an individual, as flawed as any other, tries to reform society.
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