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The Imaginary Invalid



As audiences, we go into a play much as Angelique follows his father Argan: "it is my duty to blindly follow all you determine upon me." When Argan decrees the nephew of Mr. Purgon, a certain automaton of a medical student named Tomas Diafoirus, for his daughter, we the audience rebel and clamor for our true lover, the young Cleante. In fact, we expect the sensible servant Toinette to set him right. As Argan loosens his bowels, we loosen our tight grip on reality and begin to laugh, expecting everything to be set right. The new production of Moliere's "The Imaginary Invalid" by Parson's Nose Productions provides both the humor and the adopted-to-modern day silliness that make us ridicule its misguided protagonist Argan.

Argan (Lance Davis) is a hypochondriac who puts all his trust upon his quack doctor Dr. Diafoirus (Michael Manuel), who prescribes absurd remedies like putting even number of grains of salt on eggs, roasted meat to treat the spleen, and enemas administered by a sinister Mr. Fleurant. Despite his daughter Angelique's protestations, Argan intends to marry her off to the doctor's son Tomas Diafoirus (James Calvert), who is "as strong as a Turk in his principles," "blindly attached to the opinions of the ancients" in never subscribing to the idea of the circulation of the blood (against which he has written a treatise). Angelique, already in love with Cleante (Michael Faulkner), is threatened with banishment to a convent. In desperation, Cleante enters the house as a substitute music teacher and narrates an opera with Angelique about two shepherds named Tircis and Phyllis who love each other, but are forced apart by the lady's father, who has someone else in mind. The parallels are unmistakable. Meanwhile, Argan's second wife Beline (Marisa Chandler) is intent on obtaining her husband's fortunes, and arranges with his lover Bonnefoy (Mark McCracken), the corrupt notary, to alter Argan's will in her favor. Fortunately, the maid Toinette (Jill Rogosheske) comes to the rescue, pretending to be a doctor. She tells Argan to feign having died and see the reactions of his wife and his daughter. Although he objects at first ("Is there no danger in counterfeiting death?"), Argan realizes his daughter is true, and allows her to marry as intended. Meanwhile, Argan himself becomes a doctor so he can cure himself and lampoons the medical profession.

Parson's Nose does a great job of adapting the material to modern family taste. The speech is understandable, and the French accents are fun but not disruptive. There's a small amount of dancing to trendy hip hop music, which is welcomed reward for children sitting through a moderately long play. Even its venue in a lushly green museum is conducive to good family fun.

The humor in the play is given prominent status by this production, and examples abound. In Diafoirus's scene with Argan, he articulates how absurd the medical profession can be. Calling ordinary people convenient, he maintains that a doctor's job is to treat his patients, not cure them. Toinette hilariously agrees that it's the patient's "own look-out to get well if they can." Beline and Argan's relationship is stereotypical and terribly funny. There's Beline constantly calling Argan "my petit." There's their ritual goodbyes: a disgusting sort of blown kiss memorably executed by Davis. There's Argan calling his alter ego in Cleante's opera a fool, then allowing his wife Beline to hold hands with Bonnefoy behind his back in bed. Chandler and McCracken have a quick glance that tells the audience all it needs to know, never over-selling

the moment. Toinette, who plays a 90 year old doctor who reprimand's Argan's Purgon, has some funny moments as well. First she plays the part of the expert in declaring Argan's ailments are caused by the lungs and not liver or spleen, then calls the treatments of soup, new-laid eggs, wine diluted with water, and prunes for loosening bowels all ignoramous. As the new doctor, she memorably tells Argan to pluck of his right eye, because it's robbing his left eye of nourishment. Rogosheske does the role well, adding a matter-of-fact declaration that the doctor (which she played) was flirting with Toinette (her real role). Even Angelique's weeping at her father's presumed death is voiced with mixed emotions. When she announced that she'll go voluntarily to a convent, the audience is forced into a laugh, not a cry.

It must be noted that Parson's Nose's production is a significantly shorter version of the Moliere play, and the audience is asked to jump from one section to the next in a simplified play. However, the laughs keep coming as the jokes are usually on expectations of the audience itself, such as when Tomas Diafoirus mistakes Beline for her daughter Angelique in giving the "homage" address. Perhaps sitting through Parson's Nose's "Imaginary Invalid" is much like Argan fulfilling his own fantasy of becoming a doctor to treat his imaginary diseases: we like to be entertained by entertaining ourselves.

"The Imaginary Invalid" plays at the Pacific Asia museum (<http://www.parsonsnose.com>) in Pasadena, California, until 5th of February, 2010.

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