

Molière's *Tartuffe*. Adapted by Christopher Hampton. Directed by Gérald Garutti. Haymarket Theatre, London. 25 May- 28 July, 2018.

Is Donald Trump ludicrous or is he dangerous? Is he a gross and ignorant buffoon at whom we should laugh or a cunning, duplicitous monster whom we should fear? The answer, of course, is that these questions are badly formed, because he is both at the same time. The major writers of comedy have recognised this human type, and exploited its dramatic possibilities from the time, in the fifth century, when Aristophanes first took the demagogue Cleon into his sights. Aristophanes also, of course, took Socrates to be exactly such a laughable, but subversive nuisance, and attacked him mercilessly. Many, although I am not one of them, have taken Aristophanes to have been wrong about the historical Socrates, and some few think this is also the case for the historical Cleon, but those are separate issues.

Molière's *Tartuffe* is one of the most fully realised such figures, and the unsettling ambiguity — should *Tartuffe* be seen as a relative of Sancho Pansa or of Savonarola? — is what gives the play its bite, and makes it, as Aristophanic comedy tried to be, more than just an afternoon's entertainment.

The new production of *Tartuffe* at the London Haymarket, directed by Gérald Garutti, is strikingly different from previous versions in three respects. First, Garutti transposes the action from 17th century Paris to 21st century America. Orgon and his family are wealthy French ex-pats, preyed upon by a *Tartuffe* who is a kind of New Age *guru*, complete with worry-beads, tattoos, and a vaguely 'Eastern' looking combination of white tunic and trousers. Second, the production is bi-lingual in that Orgon and his entourage speak Molière's verse, except in their interaction with the mono-lingual *Tartuffe*, where they use a new English translation by Christopher Hampton. Third, the production tries to bring to the fore the menace in the figure of *Tartuffe* himself. It is true that he is a hypocrite, professing beliefs he does not actually hold, and it is true that he is also a sophist, able, like Aristophanes' Socrates, to give complex, but specious arguments for doing exactly what he wants to do; in *Tartuffe*'s case by reference to what a suitably unspecified 'heaven' demands, requires or expects. Still, this is not in the first instance a psychological study of religious belief, or of hypocrisy, but of a kind of social dysfunction. Just as Aristophanes was not interested in whether Socrates 'believed' in one thing rather than another, but rather in the devastating effect he, in Aristophanes' view, actually had on others, the dissolution of social bonds he represented, and the danger he and his friends and students posed for the city, Garutti's *Tartuffe* is not so much an individual who is a moral failure, as a seductive, but hazardous, feature of the social landscape.

Electronic boards in a variety of positions around the theatre give a simultaneous version in English of the French dialogue, and in French of the English. I had originally worried that the use of both languages on stage would be clumsy, but actually seeing the production dispelled these worries completely. The actors were sufficiently at ease in shifting, when necessary, from one language to the other, to make the transitions seem normal, and I found some of the French actors, especially Winterhalter (Cléanthe) and Perron (Dorine) a pleasure to listen to.

The political points are made deftly and lightly without in any way being belaboured. The appearance of the representative of power ('The Officer' [*L'exempt*]) at the end is always a potentially awkward moment, if only because he is a kind of *deus ex machina*. This production fully confronts the

tricky nature of the dénouement, and actively makes something of it, turning it into a dramatic advantage.

This is a thoughtful and highly original take on this classic play. The audience at the matinee performance I attended was appropriately enthusiastic. I enjoyed it so much I would happily go to see it again. It is a production that promises to reward a second viewing.

Raymond Geuss