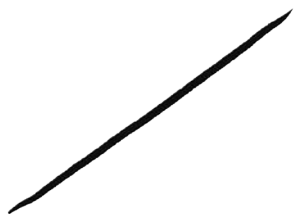


# MOLIÈRE. ORIGINAL REVISITATIONS

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**Abstract:** The article approaches the reinterpretation of Molière's plays through contemporary perspectives and taking into account the expectations of the audience. Since the twentieth century, the director has become co-author with the playwright, reading between the lines and searching for new meanings in the subtext. The director's creative approach re-signifies canonical texts attesting their validity over time. Silviu Purcărete turns the stakes of *Dom Juan* upside down by transforming the eternal conqueror into a woman. Constructing stage situations in tandem or deliberately in contradiction with the text is a catching technique that the stage director uses to energize the performance. On the other hand, the Molière trilogy (*Le ciel, La nuit, La fête/Tartuffe, Dom Juan, Poyché*) staged by members of "Le Nouveau Théâtre Populaire" portrays a Molière whose work is still germinating creative ideas. Always performing on wooden platforms, the actors jump effortlessly from one style to another, from one role to another, central or supporting the others, from prose to verse, rigorously, precisely, musically, from text to concert. An inventive tour de force.

**Keywords:** Molière, Silviu Purcărete, *Dom Juan*, travesti, "Le Nouveau Théâtre Populaire", trilogy, revisitation, Léo Cohen-Paperman, Emilien Diard-Detœuf, Julien Romelard, Anne-Sophie Grac, Avignon Theatre Festival 2021.

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## Introduction

One of the great classics, Molière, remains in the spotlight and in the eyes of the audience with reinterpretations by the youngest member of the theatre team—the director. A century and a few decades is, on the scale of two millennia of performance history, akin to the age of youth, the stage director being one of the newest members of the theatre team. The most recent sequenciality of theatre is also defined by the re-reading of traditional dramatic fictions in the grid of our time. More so, dare I say, in the voice of Molière in *The Versailles Improvisation*, "Do you think it's a small thing to portray something comic before a gathering like this?" (Molière, 1955, p. 168). The assemblies and their expectations are always different, realities are metamorphosing, and the audience's interest, a constantly dynamic entity, must be kept alive.

This is where the new author, the director, comes in. Having become, over the course of an entire (20th) century baptised "the director's", co-author alongside the playwright, he reads between the lines, seeks new meanings in the subtext, nuances, does not hesitate to make adaptations by cutting, moving the action to different geographical locations and times, rethinking the characters. He does so with originality and aesthetic sense, guaranteeing the durability of the canonical works to which he regularly returns, attesting to their aesthetic validity precisely by opening them up to re-significations. Not eternity, as Antoine Vitez points out, but durability:

Les oeuvres du passé sont durables, pas éternelles mais durables. Quand une fois une forme est trouvée, on la reprend sans cesse, on la tourne et retourne, on l'utilise comme une économie d'intelligence, jusqu'au jour où le poème a perdu son sens, on ne sait plus ce qu'il dit, c'est que les choses alors ont vraiment changé, le texte deviant opaque, il noircit par plaque, quelques beautés seulement restent./The works of the past are durable, not eternal but durable. Once a form is found, it is replayed without interruption, we turn it inside out, we use it out of an economy of intelligence, until the day when the poem has lost its meaning, we no longer know what it says, only then things change, the text becomes opaque, blackened with stains, only a few elements of beauty survive. (Vitez, 2015, p. 97).

These beauties that are historically blurred are reworked through the creative input of the artists of the day.

### ***Dom Juan in the hands of women***

As director of the Théâtre de l'Union Limoges France, Silviu Purcărete had the idea of a *Dom Juan*<sup>1</sup> out of the norm. His directorial proposal “*osé toucher*” (“*dared to touch*”), as Jean-Pierre Wurtz said, “this symbol of French theatre. I found the unprejudiced approach to this monument to national culture salutary” (Wurtz, 2002, p. 33). Purcărete’s idea turned the play’s stakes upside down and made the seductive man by definition a... woman. The striking novelty of the project comes from the cast, a female one. Purcărete approaches gender-swapping (Cîntec, 2010, pp. 76-85) in several possible variations, giving it credit as a source of innovation and surprise.

From an actor’s point of view, the gender-swapping is the total metamorphosis, since it implies the generic transformation and mainly concerns the exteriority of the act of theatrical performance. From this point of view, the handy support points are the costume, the make-up, the hairstyle, the body, the mimicry, the voice. Gender-swapping is the embodiment of the complementary, of what you are not structurally, but self-construct in the context and for the determined duration of the performance. The studied trickery of the natural differences between the two fundamental principles that make up the world requires a perfect control of the bodily and vocal imagination, demanding the technical dexterity of the performers.

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1 Théâtre de l'Union Limoges/ CDN du Limousin (1998), directed by Silviu Purcărete, music by Vasile Șirli, set design by Jose-Manuel Melo, with Laure-Anne Schuh (Dom Juan), Christine Pignet (Sganarelle), Marie-Agnes Brigot (Pierrot and Monsieur Dimanche), Melanie Caroff (Don Alonse and Gusman), Marie Cayrol (Done Elvire), Ana Ciontea (Mathurine), Mireille Franchino (La Pauvre), Celine Garnavault (Don Carlos), Emmanuelle Hiron (Charlotte), Simona Măicănescu (Don Luis).

Masculinization of femininity or feminization of masculinity, this is what the transvestite, the total mask, could be called.

As a dramaturgical resource, the recourse to gender swapping reorders the overall meanings, opening up provocative hermeneutical paths. The sources of the travesty descend into the forms of the popular, fairground theatre that Purcărete feels so drawn to (Cîntec, 2011, p. 62). He has also used this stylistic trick in *Ubu Rex with scenes from Macbeth* after Alfred Jarry and William Shakespeare (Valer Dellakeza, in *Mère Ubu*), in *Orestia*, where the chorus was mixed, in *Gulliver's Travels*, in *Phaedra*, where the group was composed of actresses in manly disguises (clothes as well as attitude), revealing their femininity (breasts) at the end. These are artistic elements that migrate through his performances, returning as stylistic trademarks. Like various objects, such as the skeleton or the suitcase, which are also part of the props in *Dom Juan*. "Trademark of French identity" (Popescu, 2017, p. 30), Molière is now played, in one of his flagship plays, by ten actresses. "By playing a character who is so at odds with your own nature, all the more proof that you are a skilled actress" (Molière, 1955, p. 175) says the playwright in the same poetic art-in-action that is *Improvisation at Versailles*.

The line retains, over time, the theatrical truth of challenging the interiority of female artists in roles imagined for men and expressed through exteriority.

Dressed in white, white stockings and white lingerie, with their hair hidden under lace-trimmed hoods towards their foreheads, of the same colour, their faces grimaced, the actresses sit in the beginning of the play at the make-up tables, also white; behind them, there are tailor's dummies (only their torsos), also white, mobile, on wheels, on which, at the end, they place their costumes, a clear sign of separation from the characters. The actresses get ready for the performance, announce the convention, display it, occasionally glance at the audience, as if to make sure it is there, in its place, as a silent partner in what is to come, to make the first visual contacts, then leave and return as characters. Convention is displayed and accepted. The scenic routes extend the action imaginatively: backstage, under the stage (through the trapdoor), extending the world from the visual perimeter, symbolically including it in the larger world.

A deliberate mix of themes, historical times, eras and evocations of various cultural geographies are to be found in Silviu Purcărete's scenic visions. *Dom Juan*, is no exception. The Collector of Hearts comes from the historical accurate time in which Molière placed him. He wears an abundant red wig, a hat with a generous *panache* and assorted clothes from the time of the King's theater company. There's a planned ambiguity here: Laure-Annes Schuh writes in the programme alongside the name of the titular character. The silhouette fits, the voice is slightly baritone, on stage it seems to be a woman, in reality it

is an actor, Laurent Schuh. The play is already starting. And it spills into every character. One wears a stunning costume (red, with glitter), accessorized with chapeau melon and gaiters (Monsieur Dimanche), another moves about in a wheelchair, actually pushed around, a ghostly creature with a goatee (Don Luis, the father). Sganarelle is overweight, and in the famous scene of the feast he becomes a sort of Pantagruel, another dramatic character to whom Purcărete would give stage attention some years later in *Pantagruel's Daughter-in-law*<sup>2</sup>, where Laurent Schuh also appears. For, Molière dixit, “all the characters he presents are figments of imagination, ghosts that he portrays as he pleases in order to cheer up the spectators... the purpose of comedy is to bring out all the flaws in people, especially those of our time.” (Molière, 1955, p. 184)

*Un coté* of the Far East comes discreetly into the scene from the inflections of the music, from the statue of the commander who has the body of an obese Buddha with a real head. The general make-up is reminiscent of that of geishas, white cheeks, eyes highlighted by black lines, lips only centrally blushed, arched. Subtle humour, jokes are part of Purcărete's aesthetic, slipping them cleverly in unexpected situations and moments. A skeleton in a baroque wig is pulled out from under the stage and carried in her arms, reminiscent of the man whose biological carcass sustained it. Constructing stage situations in tandem or in intentional contradiction to the text is a catching technique that energizes the performance.

That's what I try to do all the time, to find the clearest and most simple solution, even when reading a text. When I succeed at something, I succeed because I decipher the highlight of the text, a highlight that often seems hidden. (Purcărete in Banu, G., 2017)

The vibration of the word is related to the whole system of rethinking the text, its semantic depths and resources, its quality of being an open work.

Addressing Purcărete, Jean-Pierre Wurtz praises his “freedom of tone, which allows itself the right to confront the lyrical and the grotesque, in an almost Shakespearean approach.” (Wurtz, 2002, p. 33)

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<sup>2</sup> Coproduction of The Hungarian State Theatre Cluj-Napoca, Radu Stanca National Theatre of Sibiu and Silviu Purcărete Company of Lyon, 2003.

### ***The Molière Trilogy in its popular form***

I saw, at the 75th edition of the Avignon Theatre Festival (2021), the IN section, an interesting approach that meant a total of six and a half hours of performance in one evening. The project belongs to a company founded in Fontaine-Guérin, in France, in 2008, under the name Le Nouveau Théâtre Populaire. Its mission is to revive the artistic ideals of Jean Vilar, founder of the Avignon Festival, who believed that theatre should be a public service. The company to which I refer operates as an association of artists with equal rights. The venue is an open-air stage, a stage-like performing space set up in the garden of one of their grandmother's house. It's where they create, it's where they have started a festival that has grown continuously, to this day, a firm indication of the interest the local community has shown, a local community whose cultural expectations they have met, to which they have responded by priming them in the form of a theatrical offer oriented mainly towards the classics. You can't go wrong with that (Shakespeare, Racine etc.). For the artists of Le Nouveau Théâtre Populaire, the creation of the company was a retreat from the big cities, where commercial competition is ruthless and you don't have the chance to show what you can really do. They chose this place with audience potential, an area that was avid for theatre without knowing so. The artistic offer perfectly met the needs of cultural consumption. The relationship with the audience is popular, they play outdoors, even when it rains, and the price of a ticket does not exceed 15 Euros.

The new mode of production favoured by artists is non-competitive. All decisions are taken collectively, the actors vote on the titles to be performed, each of them can be the director, in a sort of rotation, never the same actor the following year, as new productions are one, maximum two per year. The idea is that the artists can unleash their creativity without any kind of restrictions other than artistic reasons. The company operates on the model of the old troupes, which were mainly audience-oriented, to whom they mediated encounters with widely circulated texts, in attractive formulas. 18 actors work and expect their audiences to enjoy accessible, non-commercial but audience-oriented entertainment. A "demanding theatrical art that returns to the very essence of theatre to summon our imagination"<sup>3</sup> Actors are the soul of theatre in the company's definition, each new performance is rehearsed in just two weeks, intensively, dedicated. Costumes and scenery are recycled, much comes from donations, austerity leaves the spotlight on the actors.

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<sup>3</sup> Nouveau Théâtre Populaire [Online]. Available at: <http://nouveautheatrepopulaire.fr/> (Accessed: 10 April 2023).

The Molière trilogy (*Le ciel, La nuit, La fête*<sup>4</sup> / *Tartuffe, Dom Juan, Psyché*) was performed in the courtyard of the University of Avignon. The audience was initially arranged on either side of the stage set, framing the stage actions. We were one of the elements that made symmetry concrete as a structuring line, including temporal, as each performance of the three lasted exactly 1 hour and 40 minutes. In between, two breaks give you the opportunity to refresh yourself with a snack, to rinse your eyes and mind with the splendid starry skies of the South of France and the rustle of the mistral.

*Tartuffe* was directed by actor Léo Cohen-Paperman. As in the text-centric period before the director, when one of the troupe's most valuable members made sure that the play reached the audience in the best artistic condition. Super-minimalist set, two large wooden doors for entrances/exits, hiding/masking, a table, a funerary urn, a safe, a few wooden boards, all exposed, no hiding places, outlined against the honey-coloured stone backdrop of the University walls. Wood is the preferred material, a natural element of the past, the costumes are dominated by black. *Tartuffe* is in an ancient wheelchair, also equipped with self-flagellation tools, the ultimate sign of hypocrisy and a flawless strategy for attracting sympathy through disability. The text is told in verse, in the musical language of Molière, "the linguistic priest of a great civilizing and cultural language." (Popescu, 2017, p. 30)

The acting ensemble works impeccably, a machine producing emotions transferred fluidly to the viewers. One feels the organicity of the troupe, that all the artistic solutions of the characters belong to them, come from their interiority, fit them like a glove. You feel the good chemistry, the creative run-in, you join them with pleasure in following the savoury story of this bourgeois family tricked by a bigot. History places the play among the long banned stage writings, under pressure from the offended church.

But "any ridiculous picture presented on stage should be viewed by everyone without offence. They are general mirrors, in which you must never confess to seeing yourself. To be outraged that a certain flaw is criticised is to blame oneself in the open for this flaw" (Molière, 1955, p. 141), as Molière himself well says.

*Dom Juan* (the second page of the triptych proposed by Le Nouveau Théâtre Populaire) approached the "Molière monument" in the key of actuality. The script is in prose, the heroes have contemporary profiles, tics and accents.

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4 The reference is also to Jean Vilar, who used this associative stringing in 1947, at the first edition of the Avignon Festival, to define the atmosphere of the event (the full formula was "Le ciel, la nuit, le texte, le peuple, la fête.")

The costumes are from nowadays, which moves the actions imagined 400 years ago into a present that brings the theatrical narrative as close as it can get to us. The setting is made out of a door—the same from *Tartuffe*—the wheelchair and table appear as scenic objects that link the components of the trilogy, the playing space is similar, all that matters are the characters and their scenic actions. Dom Juan is short, balding, openly displaying the attitude of his anthological duplicity. Molière is, like all classics, among us. For on the stage you must “present in a pleasing manner the vices of all [...]. You have done nothing if you have not portrayed your contemporaries in such a way that they can be recognized” (Molière, 1955, p. 145). Emilien Diard-Detœuf’s direction relies on these solutions that come from the transfer to the present, on the lively scenic dynamics, on the scenographic austerity (Anne-Sophie Grac in each of the productions).

*Psyché*—the last part of Nouveau Théâtre Populaire’s triptych, directed by Julien Romelard—glorifies the joy of artists meeting the audience. Theatre becomes a popular celebration, the actors of the first two performances celebrate the communion that the performing arts bring. To the rhythms of Italian opera, electro, with theatrical parts, sung and danced, a cathartic approach. Jealous of Psyché, who attracts the eyes and desires of men, Venus leads Amor, her son, to seduce the mortal, then break her heart. Only the ways of love are tangled, and Amor wounds himself with one of his own arrows, and the two fall hopelessly in love with each other. The rest of the story we know from mythology and Molière. The performance resorts to elements of cabaret, rock-queer opera, live music, guitar, percussion, keyboards. Neon tubes, glamorous (sequins, spandex, patent leather), skimpy, club-like outfits animate the whole scene and characterize each part (Venus wears a red dress, Psyché a simple dress, both very current; Amor, too, his wings have chain-link edges after he falls in love with the one who was supposed to be his victim).

At the antract, on one side of the scene, Grand Siècle Radio holds radio studio moments with invited artists and specialists to fill time and link the three parts. And to pull back the curtain on the backstage, letting the viewer enter there, through sight and sound. The theme is Molière, of course. The concept and moderator of these *intermezzos* is Frédéric Jessua who does interviews, mini-debates, videos, happenings for an hour (the break after *Tartuffe*) and another 30 minutes after *Dom Juan*.

The differences in aesthetics between the three performances are well thought out. They treat Molière as an author whose work is still germinating creative ideas. The first is in Alexandrine verse and classic stage clothing. The second, in prose and the evidence that it’s all happening today. The third, a mix of prose, some verse [“prose is even more than verse” (Molière, 1955, p. 169), says



Miss Béjart in the dialogue play of poetic art entitled *Improvisation at Versailles* from which I keep quoting, to link the past to the present] and a remix of Jean Baptiste Lully's music (from the interludes) as a musical comedy with rock accents.

*Chapeau bas* to actors Pauline Bolcatto, Valentin Boraud, Julien Campani, Phillippe Canales, Baptiste Chabauty, Leo Cohen-Paperman, Emilien Diard-Detouef, Clovis Fouin, Elsa Grzeszczak, Lazare Herson-Macarel, Frederic Jessua, Morgane Nairaud, Antoine Philippot, Loïc Riewer, Julien Romela. In a short space of time, they jump effortlessly from one style to another, from one part to another, central or supporting the others, from prose to verse, rigorously, precisely, musically, from text to music, then to concert. An inventive tour de force. You get the feeling of collective celebration, of joy triggered by this ancient art that never ceases to reinvent itself.

Le Nouveau Théâtre Populaire is inspired in its conception, linking temporally distant eras, caring for its audience, and doing so with a great love that shines through on the wooden platforms on which it performs. The stage doesn't lie. As in the time of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, the heart of the theatre beats through the hearts of the troupe.



*Le Ciel, La Nuit et la Fête – Trilogie Molière*

*Le Tartuffe / Dom Juan / Psyché* – Nouveau Théâtre Populaire

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Source: <https://www.sn-lempreinte.fr/a-tulle/le-ciel-la-nuit-et-la-fete-trilogie-moliere>



*Le Ciel, La Nuit et la Fête (Le Tartuffe, Dom Juan, Psyché) –*  
 Nouveau Théâtre Populaire  
 © Christophe Raynaud de Lage  
 Source: <https://sceneweb.fr/le-nouveau-theatre-populaire-cree-le-ciel-la-nuit-la-fete-au-festival-davignon-2021/>

## Conclusions

Comical situations have always been the quickest way to the heart of an audience and this assertion proves its validity, yet again, when speaking about Molière, more than four centuries after the first public encounters with his theatrical work. The aesthetic audacity of the director aims to unveil further resources that reveal surprising concoctions: they build historical bridges, bring the past into the present by reaffirming the strong connections between the two and they never cease to astonish. The raw matter of words undergoes a sort of metamorphosis and, reinforced by the magic actions of the artists, turns into moments of splendor.

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