

COMEDY TONIGHT

or: Meeting Monsieur Regnard
and *The Heir Apparent*

Voltaire said, “Whoever doesn’t enjoy Regnard doesn’t deserve to admire Molière.”

Now *there’s* a puff line to put on a theatre marquee.

Consider these tidbits from the life of Jean-François Regnard. First, that as your average young man of 23 gadding about the world he was taken prisoner in 1778 by Algerian pirates, sold into slavery, did six months’ hard labor making baskets, got ransomed, and when he arrived home hung his slave-chains on the wall in his Paris house. Second, that after a cushy Treasury job, he launched himself as a comic playwright at age 38 and became the Next Big Thing after Molière. Third, that after he’d been buried 125 years, some kids found his skeleton when his local church was being renovated, and used his skull as a projectile.

In other words, Regnard had an archetypal career as a playwright: a slave while alive, a football when dead.

Add to this that he was loved by all who knew him, that he made a great portion of his fortune on a gambling spree (he wrote a fine play called *The Gambler*), and that, passing through Lappland, he caused a furor because of his uncontrollable laughter at the traditions of a typical Lapp funeral. His name is cognate with *renard*, the French word for fox, and he lived up to it. “*Il faut, par notre esprit, faire notre destin,*” Crispin says in *The Heir Apparent*. “It’s with our wits that we create our fates.”

The buoyancy with which Regnard lived is so intrinsic to his art that the man and his work are one. The play at hand (from 1708, titled *Le Légataire universel*) is worldly, utterly

honest, satirical without being condemnatory, often bawdy, sometimes scatological, now and then macabre, and it craves jokes as a drunkard craves his liquor. Like a drunkard, the play will do anything to find the liquor as Regnard goes off on knockabout detours hunting for laughs – not out of desperation but out of gusto. Granted, some of *Heir* is a shameless rip-off of Molière's *Imaginary Invalid*. But is there anything in the *Malade imaginaire* to match the servant Crispin's inspired impersonations?

Because Regnard was writing as French classical theatre was heading into a century of much different character, the verse dialogue is more conversational than Molière, the concerns more bourgeois, while the farce is turned up (as they say in *Spinal Tap*) all the way to eleven. One can draw a straight line from *Légataire* to Feydeau's middle-class nightmares, and straight from there, or should I say *down* from there, to TV sitcoms. And what could be more up-to-date than his characters' almost feral obsession with money?

When Michael Kahn sent me *Le Légataire universel* to look at for possible adaptation for D.C.'s Shakespeare Theatre Company, I had never heard of Regnard. Yet, just as when Michael had sent me Corneille's *Le Menteur* two years previously (which became *The Liar*, which became Michael's priceless production, which turned out to be the most fun I ever had working on any play) I needed only a single reading to know that I had to take on the piece. The off-color jokes made me howl even while I marveled at Regnard's facility at rendering them in graceful yet conversational couplets.

The original Washington production (God bless Michael Kahn!) had a pig in it. I mean, *an actual pig onstage*. For the New York production at Classic Stage Company, brilliantly directed by John Rando, I cut the pig and made a number of other revisions here and there as time had taught me where the play needed tightening and/or embellishment. I also learned

immensely from Carson Elrod, the comic genius who played Crispin to perfection in both productions. The version in your hand gained from both.

How to bring the play into English? I took it as my job, while pruning some of his more extravagant asides, to mirror Regnard's restless inventiveness and tumbling action. As with *The Liar*, I took my liberties. Among other things, I beefed up Isabelle and Madame Argante, both of whom disappear in the original for the bulk of the play. Geronte held such delicious comic possibilities I probably almost doubled his part. I extended the Geronte-versus-Eraste marriage complication and embellished the impersonations that are the play's set pieces. Finally I attempted a more satisfying ending, since the original – like many French plays of that period – simply stops, abruptly, just when we expect a final concatenating cascade of unravelings and recognitions.

Working with (I won't say "on") Regnard has been a delight, for he's been, as he was in life, the best of company. As Lady Mary Wortley Montagu said of Henry Fielding: "It is a pity he was not immortal, he was so formed for happiness." Wouldn't it be wonderful if Regnard could be raised from his tomb – not to be a genial, cranial plaything this time, but to take his rightful place in the English-speaking theatre as a master of comedy? Gaiety ran in his veins as his birthright.

"*Les gens d'esprit n'ont point besoin de précepteur*," says Crispin in a line I didn't include. "True wits don't need a tutor." In that sense, Regnard was a natural.

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