



Acting 1 & 2 (Introductory Acting)

Moliere and French Comedy

Ms. Hayes, Mr. Meyer, Ms. Yung

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Learning Objective:

The student will be introduced to Moliere and French Comedy.

Bell Ringer:

What is your favorite comedic movie or television show? Why do you enjoy it?

Lesson Steps:

Read the article below and take notes. You will take a quiz after you have read it.

The works of France's greatest playwright banned in his hometown, and he died while performing in one of his own plays. Born Jean Baptiste Poquelin in 1622, Moliere was the son of a successful Paris interior decorator who had achieved the office of upholsterer to the king. Both his mother and stepmother died by the time he was 14, and Moliere's father saw to his education in the classics, philosophy, and the law. Everyone expected the young man to follow his father in the family business, but at 21 he chose the theatre as his profession and adopted Moliere as his pen name. Perhaps he did so to protect his family; theatre people of the day had no social standing and were, in fact, often in trouble with the Church.

Joining nine young men and women to found an acting troupe, Moliere toured the country for 12 years. Though he was twice arrested for debt during those early years, Moliere remained with the company and eventually began to write plays as well as perform. In 1658 his company successfully performed one of his comedies, *The Love-Sick Doctor*, before the French court, and from then on his fortunes improved. Moliere's comedies were satirical in nature, and nothing was sacred. While the court was delighted with each new play, middle-class theatregoers were less gratified as they recognized their customs and behaviors ridiculed on Moliere's stage. As he continued to write, direct, and perform in over 30 plays, he made many enemies.

His late marriage to a much younger woman was largely an unhappy one. Two of his three children died in infancy, and his estrangement from his father over his chosen profession was never resolved. An ultimate irony of his life was that he would suffer a fatal hemorrhage in 1673 while performing the title role of the hypochondriac in his own play, *The Imaginary Invalid*. Priests refused to hear the actor/playwright's final confession, and only the intercession of King Louis XIV allowed his body to be buried in a churchyard four days later.

Most theatre of Moliere's day were converted ballrooms or indoor tennis courts: long, narrow rooms with shallow stages at one end and grandstands and galleries arranged around the remaining three walls. Sight lines and acoustics were left to chance. The only seats that directly faced the stage were at the far end of the room, and the best view from that vantage point was that of the patrons who purchased cheap standing-room only tickets for the area directly in front of the stage. Sometime seats directly on the stage itself were sold to aristocratic young men who wanted to show off their fine clothes. There was no stage curtain, and scenery was comparatively simple, showing a single room or a street corner. Lighting was provided by hundreds of wax candles and small oil lanterns, which must have contributed to a rather smoky atmosphere by the end of the evening.

If the scenery was comparatively plain, the costumes were not, displaying an exuberance of colors, curls, ribbons, laces, puffs, flounces, and feathers on both men and women. Actors appeared in the latest elegant fashions of the day, with no concern for historical accuracy. Fashions changed from year to year, as they do today, and players had to provide their own costumes.

For the men, such a costume might include a shirt cut very full, so that it bloused over the breeches and puffed at the sleeves, worn with a kind of necktie fashioned from yards of lace or fine cloth, arranged in a variety of decorative folds. A very short, short-sleeved coat showed off this shirt to advantage. Breeches were very full – so full sometimes that they looked like a petticoat – and fastened above the knee. They were worn with long stockings and square-toed shoes with high heels. Men of fashion wore wigs in natural colors and elaborate styles. As accessories they might carry long decorative walking

sticks, delicate handkerchiefs, or broad-brimmed hats decorated with ostrich feathers.

Women might wear a full skirt, long enough to trail behind; sometimes an overgown was open in front and turned back or draped to show its own lining and to reveal an undergown. Necklines were low, square-cut or in a wide V, and sleeves were long or elbow-length and quite full, sometimes folded back in a cuff. Often necklines and sleeves were designed to reveal the lace or fine linen of the underclothes. The waistline was low and came to a point, and the bodice laced up the front. Built into these gowns were strips of bone to help cinch in the waist and to control posture. Shoes were similar to men's, but with higher heels and in delicate fabrics such as satin, brocade, or embroidered silk. Women often carried fans or sometimes little hand-warming muffs. They did not wear wigs to the extent that men did but had their hair dressed in ringlets, sometimes wired to stand away from the face.

The kind of costumes worn by Moliere's men and women do not allow natural movement. Instead, they encourage posing to show off rich fabrics or elegant tailoring. The accessories actors carried invited graceful gestures – broad or fluttery – with their hands. It was not possible for anyone to flop back in an easy chair; instead, men and women perched rather stiffly on the edges of straight-backed chairs after carefully arranging their costumes to show off to the best advantage.

The stage always requires some degree of exaggeration, so that even those audience members farthest away can see and hear the play. Actors and actresses of Moliere's theatre were faced with the challenge of projecting his cleverly rhymed verse through a difficult, poorly lit theatre space filled with a noisy audience. To project effectively, they adapted an exaggerated, declamatory style of acting that made use of a convention of larger-than-life stylized gestures that were thought appropriate to show certain emotions.

Practice:

Take the quiz below to check your understanding of the article. Then, check your answers with the key.

For each of the following, write "True" if the statement is true and "False" if the statement is false.

_____ 1. Moliere's plays often offended the royal court.

_____ 2. Moliere died while performing in one of his own plays.

_____ 3. Moliere's family expected him to work in the theatre.

_____ 4. In Moliere's time, women's roles were usually played by men.

_____ 5. The costumes that were popular in Moliere's day restricted natural movement.

Write the letter of the item that best completes each sentence in the blank provided.

_____ 6. Plays in Moliere's day were usually stage with

- a) Elaborate scenery
- b) Elaborate costumes
- c) simple electric lighting
- d) all of the above

_____ 7. Moliere's plays offended some theatregoers who did not like

- a) His ridicule of the middle class
- b) His experiments with music
- c) his violent fight scenes
- d) all of the above

_____ 8. In Moliere's day plays were usually performed in

- a) Outdoor arenas
- b) The basement of churches
- c) long, narrow rooms with a stage at one end
- d) large, well-lit tents

_____ 9. Fashionable men of Moliere's time wore

- a) Wigs
- b) Stockings
- c) breeches
- d) all of the above

Answer the following in 1 to 3 complete sentences

10. Explain why the theatre space common in Moliere's time led to an exaggerated style of acting.

Answers

1. False

2. True

3. False

4. False

5. True

6. B

7. A

8. C

9. D

10. Smoky, crowded, and noisy spaces with the stage at a distance from the audience required actors to use exaggerated gestures and to speak loudly