

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Modern Moliere

David Sheward · Monday, June 23rd, 2025

Moliere is having a modern moment. Two adaptations of the 17th century French playwright's comedies are now on display Off-Broadway. Both employ contemporary tropes to satirize issues afflicting 21st-century society with varying degrees of success. Multi-hyphenate artist Taylor Mac is starring in his own meta-madcap meditation on arts funding, *Prosperous Fools*, "loosely inspired" by Moliere's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (*The Would-Be Gentleman*) at Theater for a New Audience. While Jeffrey Hatcher has taken a more conventional route with a straightforward adaptation of *The Imaginary Invalid*, skewering modern medical practices at New World Stages in a production from Red Bull Theater. Both have plenty of laughs and ideas, but both have their drawbacks, delivering us two mixed bags.



Jennifer Regan, Kaliswa Brewster, and Taylor Mac in *Prosperous Fools*.

Credit: Travis Emery Hackett

Mac's *Fools* is a cloud-cuckoo concoction veering wildly between broad farce and intelligent cultural commentary. It has a lot to say about the state of philanthropy and the arts in general and at times the play (if you can call it that) says it with intelligence and style. But too often the

playwright-star has ignored Polonius's dictum that brevity is the soul of wit and he and his director Darko Tresnjak allow their gags and monologues to go on too long.

The premise takes off from Moliere considerably (Charles Ludlum wrote and starred in a more faithful version in his *Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde* in 1983.) The original focuses on the middle-class Monsieur Jourdain who aspires to the aristocracy by taking lessons in the arts but only succeeds in making an ass of himself. In Mac's free adaptation, the focus shifts to the Artist (played by Mac in a fine comic turn) who worries that he is selling out by allowing his world-premiere ballet on the myth of Prometheus to be financed by a contemptible boor (the bourgeois figure). This character, combining the worst self-aggrandizing traits of Elon Musk and Donald Trump, is identified in the program as \$#@%\$ and his name is pronounced as the sound of a game-show buzzer when a contestant delivers the wrong answer.



Sierra Boggess and Aerina Park Deboer in *Prosperous Fools*.

Credit: Travis Emery Hackett

This obvious target of derision is balanced by ##### (by contrast her name is pronounced like the gorgeous notes of an operatic soprano vocalizing.) ##### is a glamorous film star, probably based on Angelina Jolie, known for her extensive charitable donations and multiple adoptions. Costume designer Anita Yavich has cleverly outfitted her with a sumptuous ballgown decorated with the faces of hungry orphans. (Kudos to Yavich, set designer Alexander Dodge and lighting designer Matthew Richards for their smart and playful creations.) ##### also comes in a good ribbing as her sanctimonious platitudes give way to self-interest.

The plot, such as it is, concerns the Gala performance of the Artist's dance piece wherein both donors will receive an award resembling a giant-size bottle of Head and Shoulders shampoo for their philanthropies. Mac uses this basic framework to put across his satiric message, spoofing the elitist class for exploiting culture for their own ego gratification. But, as noted, the bits, particularly in the hellzapoppin' second act, go on too long or are repeated too often. An example of the latter is having Mac don a puppet-like outfit to impersonate playwright-actor Wallace Shawn and

dispense liberal pieties. It's funny once, but not the fourth or fifth time—I lost count.

Ironically, Mac even pokes fun at himself and his work with a mock fashion show in which each model represents a gradually lower form of humor from satire to stand-up comic to buffoon to the lowest grade of giggle-getter, the mime. Mac and Tresnjak try for the satire but settle for the buffoonery too often.



The cast of *Prosperous Fools*.

Credit: Travis Emery Hackett

Fortunately, the cast adds dimension to their caricaturish characters. As the Trump-Musk cultural bully, Jason O'Connell peels back the top layer of braggadocio to reveal an insecure little boy, particularly in a pointed pantomime of self-flagellation which is emblematic of the whole production. It's a revelatory, insightful idea, but stretches uncomfortably on for several minutes. Sierra Boggess is hilariously self-important as the dazzling donating film star, especially in a monologue about shame motivating her charitable impulses (again too long, but that's not her fault.)

Jennifer Regan's pill-popping artistic director, Kaliswa Brewster's idealistic and harried intern, Jennifer Smith's frantic stage manager and Aerina Park Deboer's comically impoverished orphan also provide smiles. The dances, ably choreographed by Austin McCormick to Oran Eldor's soothing score, are proficiently executed by dancers Ian Joseph Paget, Em Stockwell, Megumi Iwama, and Cara Seymour.

Mac himself is hilariously manic as the conflicted artist and deserves praise as playwright for addressing many complex issues relating to the precarious state of the arts in America, but the play tries to do too much. The most effective moments come in an epilogue he delivers in verse where he urges the audience not to race up the aisles to make a hasty exit, but to discuss the topics raised. The long piece is thought-provoking, but like too much of the preceding play could use an editor.



Sarah Stiles and Mark-Linn Baker in *The Imaginary Invalid*.

Credit; Carol Rosegg

Jeffrey Hatcher and his director Jesse Berger eschew Mac's lengthy diatribes and focus on the hijinks in his adaptation of *The Imaginary Invalid*. Here the target is the hypochondriac, wealthy Monsieur Argan who is obsessed by his maladies to the point of destroying his home life. He seeks to force his daughter into an unwanted marriage with a nitwit medical student so he can have a doctor on call and ignores his avaricious wife's plots to take his money. There are a few sharp quips about our current, deeply flawed health-care system, but they're not the main point which is just to have fun. It's telling that Hatcher has added a Marx-Brothers-esque musical finale since those film zanies are the main inspiration here. Not all the gags work (too many enema jokes), but Berger stages the 80-minute show at such a fast clip that we don't have time to notice a dud. It's on to the next bit which usually produces the desired merriment.



Arnie Burton, Russell Daniels, Emilie Kouatchou, John Yi, and Mark-Linn Baker in *The Imaginary Invalid*.

Credit: Carol Rosegg

As Argan, Mark Linn-Baker, best-known for his sitcom work, is an expert farceur, juggling jokes and physical schtick with dexterity. Sarah Stiles is the dictionary definition of saucy as the wisecracking maid Toinette. Annie Burton nearly steals the show as a trio of distinctly different doctors, each out to rob Argan of his dignity and his wealth. The large Russell Daniels, costumed by Tilly Grimes in a ridiculous child sailor's suit, matches Burton mug for mug as the oafish son of one of the medicos and the intended groom of Argan's daughter. Emilie Kouatchou as the daughter Angelique and John Yi as her true love Cleante are deliriously daffy and get to smartly lead the cast in a parody of *Les Miz* and *Phantom*. Emily Swallow as Beline, Argan's scheming spouse, and Manoel Felciano as her equally crafty lawyer lover complete the frantic and funny ensemble. Grimes and set designer Beowulf Boritt add guffaws with the sumptuous period costumes and elaborate environment.

***Prosperous Fools*: June 12—29. Theater for a New Audience at the Polonsky Shakespeare Center, 262 Ashland Place, Brooklyn, NY. Running time: two hours and ten mins. including intermission. tfana.org.**

***The Imaginary Invalid*: June 2–29. Red Bull Theater at New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St., NYC. Running time: 80 mins. with no intermission. telecharge.com.**

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