Study Guide

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BOEING

SEATTLE REPERTORY THEATRE

The Seattle Repertory Theatre presents

THE MISER

By Molière

March 13 - April 6, 1991

New English version written and
directed by Douglas Hughes
Scenic design by Hugh Landwehr
Costume design by Catherine Zuber
Lighting design by Peter Maradudin
Sound design by Steven M. Klein

CHARACTERS:

HARPAGON
a miser
CLÉANTE
his son, in love with Mariane
MARIANE
his intended bride, in love with Cléante
ÉLISE
his daughter, in love with Valère
VALÈRE
his steward, in love with Élise
MASTER JACQUES
his cook and coachman
ANSELME
Élise's prospective husband
FROSINE
a matchmaker
LA FLÈCHE
Cléante's valet
MASTER SIMON
a loan broker
MAGISTRATE
an officer of the law
LA MERLUCHE
servant to Harpagon

ABOUT THE SEATTLE REPERTORY THEATRE

Recipient of the 1990 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre, the Seattle Repertory Theatre operates with a professional company of actors, designers and stage technicians from its home base in the Bagley Wright Theatre at Seattle Center. Each student matinee is attended by 850 high school students from school districts throughout the Northwest.

SYNOPSIS:

Harpagon, a rich widower in his sixties, is so obsessed by greed that he keeps all his possessions under lock and key, starves his household, and makes his family miserable. Terrified of their father and yearning to escape his tyranny, Harpagon's two children, Cléante and Élise, are each secretly planning to marry.

Élise is in love with Valère, a young Neapolitan nobleman who some years ago was shipwrecked and presumed lost by his family. Valère has become Harpagon's steward (head butler) in order to be nearer to Élise. As he makes plain, it is only his love for her that keeps him from returning to Naples to be restored to his proper place in the world. But Harpagon announces he has found a husband for his daughter; she is to be married to Anselme, a prosperous man in his fifties who, to Harpagon's delight, has agreed to take her without a dowry. Valère and Élise plan to run away together, but meanwhile, Valère uses his talents as a flatterer to keep on Harpagon's good side and allay his suspicions.

Harpagon himself has plans to marry a young woman named Mariane. Unfortunately, his son, Cléante, is also in love with her and the two are planning to elope. However, as Harpagon has always kept him destitute, Cléante must somehow obtain a considerable amount of money in order to escape. Therefore, he arranges to borrow from an anonymous loan shark whose rates are absurdly high. But this scheme goes awry as the lender turns out to be Harpagon himself and father and son indignantly confront each other.

Despite his wealth, Harpagon is too cheap to provide a proper dinner for his own (and his daughter's) betrothal. Further, his horses are so underfed they can't even draw the carriage. Master Jacques, Harpagon's cook who doubles as his coachman, feels that (unlike Valère) he can no longer stand by and watch his master humiliate himself and his family. But the unadorned truth only angers the old man, and with Valère standing by, Harpagon beats Jacques.

Mistrustful of banks, Harpagon keeps a considerable sum of gold in a cash box buried in his garden. In order to aid Cléante's escape, his valet, La Flèche, steals the money. When Harpagon finally realizes that his son has stolen his fiance's affections, he is merely aggravated. But when he discovers that someone has swiped his cash box, he becomes insane with rage and worry.

Jacques, who bears a grudge against Valère, denounces him as the thief. Thinking that he is being accused of robbing Harpagon not of his money but of his daughter, Valère readily confesses to the crime. To this Harpagon reacts so violently that Valère feels he must reveal his true identity. Just as he does so, Anselme (who, years ago, after losing his family at sea, changed his name and left Naples for France) enters and discovers that Valère and Mariane are in fact his long-lost children. Cléante announces to his father that he knows where the cash box is but will return it only if Harpagon will allow him to marry Mariane. At first, Harpagon is reluctant to make any promises, but when the cash is restored to him and Anselme agrees to foot the bill for both weddings, Harpagon agrees to allow his children to marry. Anselme and the four young lovers depart to celebrate, leaving Harpagon alone with his only true love — his gold.

ABOUT MOLIÈRE

When Molière (born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin in 1622) was nine years old, his father, Jean Poquelin, a prosperous Parisian upholsterer, bought for himself and his heirs a title: *tapissier et valet de chambre du roi* ("royal upholsterer"). To earn his new salary of 300 livres per year (one livre equals approximately $11), Poquelin would live for three months of the year at court where his principal duties were to arrange the royal furniture and make the bottom half of the royal bed.

Though such a career move might seem ridiculous or demeaning from a modern perspective, by the standards of his age, Poquelin had, so to speak, "made it." In 17th-century France the prescribed route to success for any respectable male member of the bourgeoisie was to establish himself in business and buy his way into the nobility — thus bringing himself ever closer to the center of prestige and power, the king.

Poquelin had blazed the trail and must have had every expectation that his son would follow in his footsteps. Accordingly, that same year, he enrolled the boy in a fashionable secondary school, the Jesuit College at Clermont. Young Poquelin, whose classmates included the Prince of Conti and Cyrano de Bergerac, proved an able student, and an avid reader of poetry and plays. As a part of the curriculum, the Jesuits frequently staged theatrical spectacles that were so elaborate that even the king himself sometimes attended. Though Jean-Baptiste probably took part in these productions — and may have shown great promise at an early age — neither his teachers nor his family would have encouraged him to consider a career in the theatre.

The theatre was not, by any means, a respectable profession. Indeed, since the fourth century, actors had been excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church; they could not be buried, married or given any other sacrament of the Church unless they renounced their calling, repented and were absolved. To earn their living, most actors needed to travel from town to town. Therefore, in order to attract a respectable audience and to avoid charges of vagrancy by the local authorities, a theatre troupe's very survival depended on securing the capricious protection of a royal or noble patron. It was a precarious way of life. A solid citizen such as Jean Poquelin would likely have distrusted actors for what he saw as their moral looseness, uncertain social position and dubious means of support.

By 1637, Poquelin had arranged for his son to succeed him as royal bed-maker. It may be that the young man was already seeking an alternative, for, upon leaving the College at Clermont in 1639, he made a half-hearted attempt to study law. Further, by this time, he may have become involved in amateur theatre; it was around this time that young Poquelin began his life-long friendship with a family of actors, the Béjarts. It has also been surmised that he was Madeleine Béjart's lover. Five years older than Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, Madeleine had begun acting at sixteen, had bought her own house at eighteen, and had an illegitimate child at twenty. In 1642, perhaps as a way of breaking up this liaison, Poquelin sent his son to attend the king at court at its temporary residence in Narbonne.

The elder Poquelin's strategy was a miserable failure. The next year, the young man signed away his title for 630 livres, collected his inheritance and, with the Béjart family, formed the Illustre Théâtre. Soon after, perhaps in defiance of his father[1], he adopted the name Molière.

In 1645, the Illustre Théâtre set up shop in a converted tennis court. They were not an immediate success; nor did Molière show any initial brilliance as a fledgling actor. His aspirations tended toward tragedy, for which he was temperamentally and physically unsuited. As Voltaire would later write, Molière had a "kind of hiccough that unfitted him for serious roles," but made "his comedy the more enjoyable." In any case, the expense of converting and maintaining the new theatre proved too great. The company was forced to borrow money at exorbitant rates, and Molière was soon imprisoned for debt.

Whatever resentment Poquelin may have harbored towards his son, he did not completely turn his back on him. In fact, he helped to clear Molière's debt and eventually housed some members of his troupe. Years later, when his father found himself in debt, Molière would return the favor.

As Paris had not been good to them, the Béjarts and Molière decided to try their luck in the provinces. For the next twelve years, they travelled from place to place, honing their craft and establishing their reputation. These were the formative years of Molière's career, the years in which he learned the art of holding on to the attention of a difficult audience without losing his poise. He not only developed his powers as an actor (both of scripted works and of partly improvised farces in the style of the Italian commedia dell'arte), but as a director, impresario and playwright. Eventually, he became the recognized leader of the troupe.

In 1653, the company secured the patronage of Molière's schoolmate, the Prince of Conti, and soon became much more prosperous and popular. Four years later, however, after a life-threatening illness, the prince was converted to Jansenism, an extremist Catholic sect, and unceremoniously discharged the troupe from his employ. He would later write a religious tract against the theatre in which he accused Molière of atheism.

By this time, Molière felt ready to try Paris again. In 1658, he managed to obtain the patronage of the king's brother, Monsieur, who arranged for the troupe to perform for the twenty-year-old Louis XIV. Molière's offering, *Nicomedes*, a tragedy by Pierre Corneille, met with somewhat chilly reception. But just when the day seemed lost, Molière approached the king and asked his permission to perform one of his own short farces, *The Amorous Quarrel*. The play was a success, and Louis, very much amused, commanded Molière to remain in Paris. Molière's company was soon installed in the Théatre du Petit-Bourbon, near the Louvre (then the seat of French government).

The first year was difficult. Paris' well-established theatre troupes, including that of Montfleury at the Hôtel du Bourgogne, drew the lion's share of the audience. Still, Molière lost very few actors to rival companies. As his friend, La Grange, wrote, Molière inspired in his actors an unusual loyalty: "All the actors, loved their chief, who united his extraordinary genius with an honorable character and charming manner, compelling them to protest that they would never leave him, but always share his fortunes."

In 1659 Molière had his first real popular success with *The Affected Ladies*, a comedy mocking the literary pretensions of certain Paris salons. By combining the verbal dexterity of the contemporary tragic repertoire with the physical and whimsical techniques of popular farce, Molière had begun to distinguish himself from other dramatic writers of his age.

As his fortunes increased, so did the bitterness of his rivals. In 1660, without warning, the king's building superintendent began to demolish Molière's theatre in order to make way for a new wing of the palace. Some have speculated that this episode was prompted by some of Molière's enemies at the Hôtel de Bourgogne who felt they had been ridiculed in *The Affected Ladies*. But whatever the cause, upon hearing the troupe's urgent petition, King Louis ordered that the troupe move to the much grander Palais-Royal theatre.

In 1662, when he was forty, Molière married Armande Béjart, a woman barely half his age. Vain and capricious, she antagonized many of his friends. Molière himself, now extremely preoccupied with his work, once remarked that he was a poor husband to her. Though Molière and the Béjarts maintained that Armande was Madeleine's younger sister, there is some evidence that she was in fact her illegitimate daughter by the Comte de Modéne. Worse, Molière's enemies spread the rumor that Armande was actually his own daughter. But the king, who had grown increasingly partial to Molière, protected him from the threat of serious harm. In 1663, he awarded the playwright an allowance of a thousand livres per year as the "comic poet" of his court, and, the following year, as if to banish all doubt as to where royal favor lay, the king stood as godfather to Molière and Armand's son, Louis.

Still, royal protection could only extend so far. Molière had a knack for making fun of powerful people, and though Louis was greatly amused by his work, the playwright had to proceed cautiously. In 1664, he banned Moliere's *Tartuffe*, the tale of a scoundrel who covers his vices with a cloak of religious zealotry. At the play's premiere, the Jansenists had reacted with a howl of protest. Though Louis despised religious extremists, he apparently thought it prudent to not alienate them.

In 1665, Louis assumed patronage of Molière's company, thus assuring Molière's position at court. Armand, meanwhile, had become one of Molière's best leading actresses, and, though their marriage was something of a failure (by now, they were spending much of their time apart), their professional association continued to bear fruit. Molière's new position as the provider of royal entertainments — which often meant that he had to supply Louis with fully-mounted productions on just a few days notice — greatly taxed his physical well-being. By the time he wrote *The Miser* in 1668, Molière had begun to develop lung trouble.

In the years that followed, for the sake of his health, Molière's friends urged him to give up acting, but he refused. One night in 1673, before a showing of *The Imaginary Invalid* in which Molière was to play the title role, he was so ill that his fellow actors begged him not to perform. But Molière, arguing that the stagehands would not be paid if the performance were cancelled, said he considered it a "point of honor" to go on. Shaken with coughs on stage, Molière passed them off as his customary comical hiccups. Shortly after the final curtain, he collapsed. He asked for a priest, but by the time one arrived, Molière was dead.

As he had neither renounced his profession nor received the sacrament of extreme unction, Molière was initially refused burial in Church ground. However, after Armande made an emotional appeal to the king, the Church allowed the great dramatist to be interred in a regular cemetery, "After dark, with no pomp… and unaccompanied by any service."

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[1] *Alternatively, it has been suggested that, as many actors of the time adopted stage names, Molière was merely following the fashion. It may also be that he wished to spare his father the humiliation of being associated with the theatrical profession.*

CURRICULUM SUPPLEMENT FOR *THE MISER*

PRE-PLAY ACTIVITIES

SUGGESTED READING AND TOPICS FOR RESEARCH

Have students read the play and discuss the characters and their relationships with each other. Have students read the study guide.

What is the importance of comedy in our lives?

If you were to direct *The Miser*, where and when would you place it? Explain your choice. How much of the story relies on where you place it? How would you cast it? Can you think of t.v. and movie actors you would use? Who would they be and why?

POST-PLAY ACTIVITIES

FOR DISCUSSION OR ESSAY

For many years Molière did not make very much money, but he was doing what he loved. Is doing what you find fulfilling as responsible as making money? Why or why not?

Do you think of complying with your parents expectations when you think of your own career and life choices? Would you choose a career if it meant extreme disapproval from your parents?

The Miser explores some issues that are basically dark: distrust, family conflict, violence, loss of identity, relationships, deceit; how do you feel about the treatment of these issues with humor? What purpose does the humor serve? How would this play serve as a drama?

Costumes play a very important role in theatre. Think of the first moment each character walked onstage and what they were wearing. What did the costume tell you about the character?

Why do think Cléante and Élise stay with their father Harpagon as long as they do? What makes them finally leave him? Why doesn't he just throw them out?

What is the symbolism of Harpagon burying his money in the dead garden?

What is it about families that make people stay together even when relationships are very dysfunctional? What would you do if Harpagon was your father? What advice would you give to a friend whose father was Harpagon?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of a marriage arranged for economic reasons?

Compare and contrast Harpagon's relationship with his son Cléante and his daughter Élise. In what ways does he treat them differently? Similarly? Does he have different expectations for each of them?

Have you ever been obsessed with something or someone. What did it feel like? Can anything positive come from obsession?

What role does money play in your life? How important is it? Does money have an impact on your relationship with your family and friends? If so, How?

In Harpagon's house everything is secured and categorized, the garden is dead. What themes do these scenic elements parallel? What other scenic elements parallel themes in the play?

Valère hates Harpagon but because he loves Élise he will do anything to stay on Harpagon's good side. This includes lying. Is lying always deceptive or is Valére's behavior justified?

All the characters are trying to get something out of Harpagon by deceiving him. Does Harpagon deserve this?

How will Harpagon live out the rest of his life? Will he be alone? Will his children ever come visit?

ACTIVITIES

While *The Miser* is classified as a comedy, there are many elements that are dramatic. Divide the class into two groups. Have one group create a list of all the comic elements and moments in the play. Have the second group list all the dramatic moments and situations. Have each group defend the play as a comedy or drama using their lists. Are there moments that appear on both lists? If so, why does this happen?

Have the students remember as many "things" from Harpagon's house as they can (examples: organ pipes, gears, a periscope). Have them choose their favorite item and write a story about how Harpagon obtained the item and under what circumstances. Have them share their stories with the class.

FOR DEBATE

Divide students into teams for debate. Have each team pick a statement and refute or support its conclusion:

- Most of life is driven by human appetite and desire which seems to run us much more than our reason does.

- Parents always want what's best for their children.

- Children always wish to gain there parents respect.

- Money is evil.

Some time later, according to Louis Racine (son of dramatist Jean Racine) the king asked a prominent critic, "Who would you consider the finest of the great writers honoring France during my reign?" When the critic immediately replied, "Molière, Your Majesty," Louis seemed puzzled for a moment. "I would not have thought so," he said at last. "But you know more about such things than I."

ON ADAPTING *THE MISER*

> It's an idealistic error to consider *The Miser* as a slice of life on the existence of a Parisian bourgeois. The notion of slice of life is suspect. Too often directors go through a gigantic process of archaeological reconstruction. We enter into the scenario of a play as if it were a true story. But it's not a true story.
>
> —*French director Antoine Vitez*

Director Douglas Hughes' vision of *The Miser* is decidedly different from the "usual" or "traditional" approach to the play. Though his translation is, in large part, faithful to Molière's French, Hughes—who has been strongly influenced by Vitez' writings on Molière — decided early on that he would not put on an "archaeological reconstruction" of the play, but instead would stage it to emphasize its more suggestive, fantastic qualities. In collaboration with set designer Hugh Landwehr and costume designer Cathy Zuber, Hughes has set the production, not in 17th-century France, but in a kind of 19th-century nightmare world, a world inspired more by the atrocious darkness of the illustrations of Edward Gorey and Max Ernst than by the Enlightenment of the age of Louis XIV.

The following is excerpted from Hughes' notes on *The Miser* and from a conversation with the director.

Q: As a director, why did you choose to translate *The Miser* yourself?

A: I wanted to learn why Molière was great. I'd felt until now that I was taking it on hearsay. [Screenwriter] Preston Sturges spoke of going to school in France when he was a young boy and, every Christmas, as he put it, being obliged to perform in one of Molière's "allegedly hilarious" plays. Most of the time I don't enjoy productions of Molière's plays either. There's something that's always given me kind of a headache about the period and modern attempts to re-create the sociology and the manners of the France of Louis XIV.

So I thought one way to try to really get under the skin of the play was to translate and adapt it myself so that I wasn't a party to any assumptions about period and manners. The sociology of the period didn't really matter to me. What I was trying to do was to get as close to the play as I could, to see beyond just the manners and some notion of style, to get at some kind of comic substance.

Q: And what did you discover?

A: What mattered was a kind of primal struggle about parents and children. In Molière's plays, there's always this control-freak character, someone who [like Harpagon] wants to control everything around him and who is unseated in the end. I think Molière was joking about his own tendencies to want to control everything in his theatrical company.

Molière's plays are a celebration of human chaos and the fact that life is an impossible substance to control — that what you must learn to do is navigate it and accept horrible and painful things that happen. The plays are often described as works that promulgate balance and harmony and the "reasonable" approach to life. That's just not the way I see it. It's not as though suddenly Descartes[2] had been given the ability to write plays and was writing cool satires about how we can all behave well and how civilized society can function well. We live according to our passions, even when our passions direct us away from happiness and freedom.

I think that, in a way, in the so-called "Age of Reason," Molière was the antidote. He was saying, "Well, reason is all very well and good, but I see life as a kind of chaos full of untoward events and inexplicable actions. Most of life is driven by human appetite and desire which seems to run us much more than our reason does." So, since that level of the play was what interested me the most, I asked myself, "What is the shorthand for a kind of sick parent-child relationship? For repression? For desire that is denied?" I thought of the Victorians. Now here again, I was not interested in doing a sociologically exact Victorian *Miser*. I was interested in using that realm to create an anxiety dream-world, a nightmare about having the worst possible father. So then I thought of Lewis Carroll [the 19th-century author who wrote *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*] and the kind of crazy underground world that Alice enters where things are huge, swollen manifestations of her fears and dreams.

Q: So in a sense Harpagon's children are the heroes of the play as you see it?

A: No, I think that in a truly comic world there are no heroes. There are only greater or lesser slaves to human greed and lust and the desire for dominance and power. And I think Molière is that great kind of comedian who knows the worst and forgives us — and, in fact, realizes there's something wonderfully vulgar and vivid about the worst in us. So I have tried to look at Valère and Cléante and Élise and Mariane as young people who are frightened by life, struggling with life, acting out roles and trying to get through. Cléante may have the biggest journey to go. He's often portrayed as a dandy — very flamboyant and a spendthrift in opposition to his father's miserliness. I just didn't see that working. I tried to do Cléante as a very diminished fellow who feels like flinching every time his father raises his hand. He's lived with this all his life. It's psychologically true that people can become the exact opposite [of their parents], but I wanted to see somebody who, at first, is more dominated and mousy, and then, over the course of the play, breaks free.

I think [letting go] is very difficult for sons and fathers and mothers and daughters. As a child, you're given the opportunity to become yourself, to break in a healthy way from the patterns of your upbringing. But whether you choose to do that work and become your own person is up to each one of us. And some of us never do it. I've tried to think of *The Miser* that way. I'm hoping that there is some underlying purpose about the play that has to do really with the reasons why we have to rebel against our father, why we have to challenge the things that we think are mistaken and wrong about where we come from.

When Molière was writing [*The Miser*] he'd had a life of great travail and illness and struggle and censorship. His father had renounced him because he became an artist instead of an upholsterer or a lawyer. So I think, in part, the play is about making a choice in life that is defiant of your father. To do that takes a kind of a maturity. I look at it very much from the children's point of view because I'm not a parent. I'm not a father.

Q: Do you think, then, that Molière was actually writing about his relationship with his own father?

A: I don't know precisely how all this is brought to bear in Molière's writing. Certainly not in direct correspondence to ***his*** life. That's why I think of the plays as great dreams. He's not giving a literal father-son story with all the texture of what occurred in his life. It's not "The Tale of the Boy Who Wanted to Be an Actor." But it is an explosion of his own anxiety and feelings about just the very fact of having a father and needing to come to some peace with him.

Q: As a way of making the play more accessible, you've moved the setting forward in time. Why not set it in the present?

A: Well, there's the dowry thing — the children are really owned by their parents. Of course, that's still true, to an extent, but it's a subtler thing now. We have different ideas about our children's autonomy. But I wanted to make it extreme. I didn't want Harpagon to be talking on his car phone or something. The thing is, he's reclusive in type and kind of an outlaw, a monster. He's not a respectable greed-head. He's a weirdo; he's an eccentric. So, we've taken contemporary ideas about the characters and tried to translate them into a period that we borrowed because we like its kinky tightness and its Alice-in-Wonderland-ness.

Q: You have referred to the environment of the play as "death-loving."

A: By "death-loving," I mean a kind of holding on instead of going out into the world and opening up. I think that great advice in life (and it's advice I have trouble taking) is letting go of things, letting go of anxiety. Open up to things;

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[2] *Extremely influential in Molière's time, Réne Descartes (1596-1650) the rationalist French philiosopher and scientist, devoted much of his career to an effort to extend mathematical methods to all fields of human knowledge. Beginning with his famous formulation, "I think, therefore I am," Descartes (and other rationalists who followed him) set out to arrive at basic truths about the world not by experience, but through the use of pure reason and "self-evident" premises.*

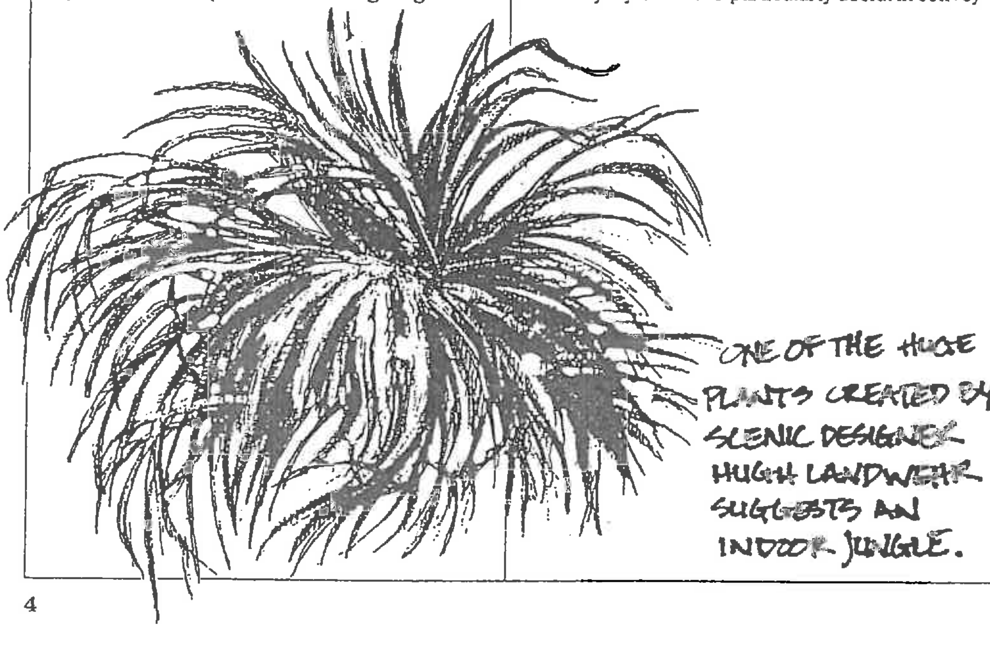
that, to me, is the secret of life. Give and take. Terror of chaos lead to the rationale for control, for fascism. It becomes necessary, we think, to repress, to suppress. Harpagon's house is a mausoleum. It's the creation of somebody who resents life because he's afraid of death. And when you're really driven by your fear of death, you will not live. And he really can see only the two things that really drive our society which are money and sex.

Q: So what might you say to someone who comes to the show expecting see the usual re-creation of Molière's style and period?

A: All I can say is what one always says: I think the play is great enough to admit to interpretation, and I don't think I have deviated from the spirit of Molière's intentions. I'm taking a lot of things that mean something to me and hoping that, in their collision with Molière's play, they will mean something to others. And that's really all it ever is. I've seen a ["traditional"] production of this play recently that I thought was flat as a board. I think [directors are] very often excused from dealing with the essence of a work by saying, "Well, we have to be faithful." To what? When you think of the wild spectacles Molière produced for the court of Louis, do you think he really worried about such things as, "Is this the proper way to portray antiquity? Is this the way life really was outside the Rome of Plautus?" I've seen "faithful" productions of Molière's plays. Frankly, I didn't have a lot of fun.

Q: But ultimately what Molière writes about — betrayal and greed, and so on — isn't funny stuff.

A: There is no such thing as funny stuff. It's all *the* stuff — lechery, murder, family conflict, loss of identity. Whether it's funny is just a matter of viewpoint. Someone said, "Comedy is tragedy that happens to other people." That is the great comic fact. Look at life a certain way and it will be tragic. Look at life a certain way and it will be comic. I think the comedian is in a way the pessimist. Comedy is the creative response of the cynic. He or she doesn't believe in the perfectibility of mankind. It's just a matter of coming to some kind of acceptance and balance. And the comic spirit is the spirit that keeps civilization going.



ONE OF THE HUGE PLANTS CREATED BY SCENIC DESIGNER HUGH LANDWEHR SUGGESTS AN INDOOR JUNGLE.

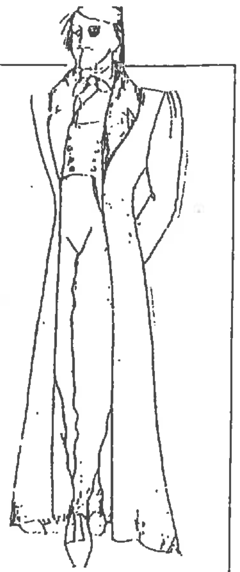
DESIGNING *THE MISER*

The idea of setting *The Miser* in the 19th century has been extremely evocative, not only for Hughes, but for the production's designers as well. As set designer Hugh Landwehr remarks, the Victorians were nearly as obsessive as Molière's miser. Harpagon is a great hoarder, Landwehr explains, "not just of money, but of things and people as well. He's retentive — he holds on to everything. And the Victorians were the same way. The 19th century was the last time in history when people thought it might be possible to really know or comprehend everything in the world." Furthermore, like Harpagon, "they had a kind of mania for collecting and cataloging" — for amassing data, observations and artifacts in such centralized storehouses as museums or encyclopedias.

Landwehr has created a setting for *The Miser* that is a surreal amalgam of the great hoarding places of the Victorian era. Crammed with curios and relics (including organ pipes, a periscope, factory lamps, tremendous gears, the backbone of a dinosaur, several objets d'art and a large stuffed lizard) and overgrown with enormous plants, Harpagon's house is a combination warehouse, conservatory (large greenhouse), factory, prison compound and "disused or misused" natural-history museum. "It's like an indoor jungle," says Landwehr, "horribly alive."

In keeping with the nightmarish eccentricity of Landwehr's setting, Cathy Zuber's costumes are inspired not by the relatively sedate styles of the end of the century, but by the more extreme fashions — the pinched waists, broad shoulders, hoop skirts, etc. — of the mid-1800s.

Many of the visual ideas that have found their way into the production are from the Victorian-style etchings and line drawings of such illustrators as Gustave Doré, Max Ernst and Edward Gorey. Though Doré (1833-1883) is the only true Victorian among them (Ernst came of age in the 1920s and Gorey is contemporary), all employ a kind of dark, dense, visually claustrophobic 19th-century style that are particularly useful in conveying the outlandishly cluttered, constricted atmosphere of Harpagon's world.



A COSTUME SKETCH OF HARPAGON BY DESIGNER CATHERINE ZUBER

In terms of its palette, the production will be very dark, says Hughes, very much like the colors on a wrinkled dollar bill, green, grey, black — with occasional isolated use of brighter colors for effect. "In this largely black-and white environment, one such notable use of color is in the floor of the house and the sky outside it. "I asked myself," Landwehr explains, "What would the world look like to someone who is so obsessed with material wealth?' Then I had the idea of doing the floor and the sky as if they were literally made of gold." Throughout the play, the gold surfaces will be partially obscured by the clutter of the rest of the set. But in the final scene, as Hughes explains, "everything in the set disappears except the floor and the sky." As an illustration of just how isolated Harpagon is, how detached he has become from all that is truly precious in life, the walls, furniture and all the other objects in the miser's menagerie pull back, leaving the miser alone with his gold. "Ironically," Hughes observes, "once all the stuff goes away, it's open, it's free, it's golden. And yet Harpagon has got his little box and is clutching it. It's like you're given the choice of holding on to your diamonds or grabbing the rope to save your life. Which is it going to be?" Asked about doing the play "out of period," Landwehr's response is similar to Hughes'. "There are far better ways to learn about the 17th century," he says, "than going to see a Molière play." Though Landwehr acknowledges that, in designing a show, it is important for him to know the historical background of the play and the playwright, he says that the more he works in the theatre, the less important it seems to convey that background to the audience in any literal sense. As theatrical experience is in the here and now, it is more important to communicate the spirit of the play to the audience in a way that is immediate and striking. "Often, but not always," he says, "this means moving the play's period forward. But the essential human elements of the play do not change no matter what."

This study guide was written by David Hlavsa and edited by Andrew Emery. David Hlavsa is head of the theatre department at Saint Martin's College in Lacey, Washington.