

Bulgakov's 'Moliere' Still Has Political Resonance

By [John Freedman](#)

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The play tells of the 17th century French playwright's relations with woman, theater and King Louis XIV.

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Two productions lurk in Valery Belyakovich's staging of Mikhail Bulgakov's "Moliere: A Cabal of Hypocrites" at the Stanislavsky Theater — a heartfelt backstage drama and a political broadside. The latter remains dormant through much of the performance, but when it appears, it does so with conviction.

Bulgakov's play about the famous French actor and playwright juggling allegiances to women, his theater company and King Louis XIV, was completed in the early 1930s and has often been accompanied by controversy. Attempts to produce it at the Moscow Art Theater between 1930 and 1936 finally brought fruit, of sorts, in February 1936. But the run lasted only seven performances.

Arguably the work's best rendition was a 1973 teleplay filmed by the great theater director

Anatoly Efros, starring another great director, Yury Lyubimov, as Moliere. This particular examination of an artist struggling to remain viably creative when forced to demonstrate constant obeisance to the powers-that-be has always been seen as a lacerating comment on the difficult relationships that Efros and Lyubimov each had with Soviet-era bureaucrats.

One is tempted to say that the current historical moment, when discontent with the policies of President Vladimir Putin continues to grow, suits the play well. That is the easy way of seeing it and that is why, I suspect, Belyakovich coyly avoided political references for the first half of the performance. He wasn't interested in taking the obvious road.

Each time the play offers an opportunity to take a swipe at King Louis XIV (Vladimir Korenev) or his scheming archbishop (Mikhail Remizov), Belyakovich pulls back and allows the pair to make harmless, triumphal parades around the stage, receiving the applause not only of the Stanislavsky Theater actors playing Moliere's actors, but also of audience members who are inclined to applaud things like that.

Meanwhile, we are introduced to the intricacies and emotional turmoil of Moliere's personal life.

Moliere loves the teenage Amanda (Anna Senina) and casts off his consort of 20 years, Madelaine Bejart (Lyudmila Lushina). Some of his actors are horrified, for they know the truth – Amanda is not Madelaine's sister as it has long been claimed, but the daughter of Madelaine and Moliere. This once inconvenient truth has become a moral scandal that the archbishop plans to use to destroy Moliere's reputation.

Belyakovich, who himself plays Moliere with an attractive brusqueness, brings the characters in this twisted personal story close to the front of the stage, usually keeping spotlights on them while allowing the rest of the stage to go dark. This is true of Moliere's trysts with Amanda, his pained parting with Madelaine and private talks with such troupe members as the eccentric assistant Bouton (Alexander Gorshkov) and the dour and loyal Lagrange (Lera Gorin).

These close-up views heighten sensations of intimacy, but they also blur the line between Moliere's personal tragedy and his deeply emotional attachment to his work and art. Moliere's life is his art, there is no separating the two. His love for Amanda and his fear of being betrayed by her comes from the same place in his heart that makes him ready to forgive his actors for their transgressions against him.

Moliere is altogether different with the king. Here he bows too quickly and laughs too hard.

Korenev's king is of the type who receives all praise graciously because he knows he deserves it. As such, it is easy for him to turn against a favorite, for everyone deserves the punishment they receive, as well. Thanks to the archbishop's campaign against Moliere, King Louis is forced to censure Moliere, and he does so almost without blinking.

"My whole life I licked his spurs and thought nothing but 'don't squash me,'" Moliere mutters angrily. "He squashed me. Tyrant!"

The outburst comes quickly, without warning, but it hits forcefully. And it underscores

the scenes that follow: a weak but calmly emboldened Moliere exhorting his troupe to keep performing, even after the kings' armed men storm the theater, killing the doorman. If Moliere's demands of "Play!" don't go so far as to have the ring of rebellion, they are a sign of defiant protest.

Belyakovich keeps things moving at a breakneck speed with masked dancers often racing across the stage, sometimes in compromised synchronization. They provide transitions where text has been cut and offer the chaotic atmosphere of a performance underway. That at times was a bit over-the-top, but the two, strong, interlocking stories about Moliere never were.

"Moliere: A Cabal of Hypocrites" (Molyer: Kabala Svyatosh) plays Sat. and July 13 at 7 p.m. at the Stanislavsky Drama Theater, located at 23 Tverskaya Ulitsa. Metro Pushkinskaya. Tel. 699-7224. www.teatr-stanislavsky.ru. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes.

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