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When I first witnessed the production of *Tartuffe* by the Playmakers Repertory Company on February 25, 2018, in the Paul Green Theatre, I was originally perplexed behind the meaning of the caption located on the bottom cover of the playbill which dubbed the play as a “comedy of religious proportions”. However, after experiencing this ephemeral performance with my own eyes, it became obvious to me that the lessons taught through this modern adaption by David Ball cannot be measured using any conventional modes of measurement. By taking the audience on a captivating journey through the paradoxical realms of symbolism and satirical comedy, *Tartuffe* seeks to illustrate the hypocrisy that plagues all facets of human society and the deception which permeates everyday life. These forms of deception can be found through various important staples of society, including religion, race, and economic power. Despite being originally created in the seventeenth century, the present-day story adaption of *Tartuffe* delivers an enduring message that is capable of personally connecting with an audience regardless of the era. This dramatic production by the Playmakers Repertory Company, orchestrated by director Saheem Ali, puts forth the perfect fusion of contemporary entertainment and classical wisdom to leave the audience emboldened to reflect on what forms of hypocrisy and fraud exist within their own lives.

As evinced by the family’s continuous struggle to expose the antagonist of Tartuffe (Joey Collins) as the self-righteous liar that he really is, this production of *Tartuffe* is loaded with various external and internal conflicts among the characters that are grounded in the struggle to either expose or reaffirm each other’s hypocritical beliefs. Through the conflicts and interactions of the characters, the audience is able to witness firsthand the gradual unraveling of certain false personas. No character exemplifies this more than Orgon (Ray Dooley), who spends much of the

play stubbornly fighting against the insightful advice given to him by his own family and household. Although Dooley portrays a character who claims to be a virtuous and pious Christian, his dedication to holiness is quickly abandoned once he is personally criticized by Tartuffe in the climax of the production. This rapid transformation can serve as a cautionary tale against the overly pious modes of religion, which only seeks to indulge the hypocrites as an avenue of self-glorification.

The choice and color of the costumes, created by costume designer Anne Kennedy, further serves as an example of the hypocrisy that exists within our social classes. Corresponding perfectly with the light background induced by the bright stage lights incorporated by lighting designer Oliver Wason, nearly every character in the play dons a respectable outfit with illuminating colors that would be fit for the elite of society. However, the maids and servants throughout the play stand out in stark contrast as they only sport dark attire to signify their status in the social hierarchy. Despite Orgon presumably being the leader and intellectual power of the household, it is constantly the maid Dorine (Shanelle Nicole Leonard) who is the source of knowledge and reason within the play. The costumes designed by Kennedy draw perfect attention to the overall irony of the play as the folly of generalizations based on social status is highlighted through the shadowy colors. The most extravagant costume belongs to Madame Pernelle (Kathryn Hunter-Williams), which further serves to support the notion of deceit and irony given that she is the most clueless character throughout the story and refuses to look past her own ignorance regarding Tartuffe.

From the clamorous entrance of Madame Pernelle to the clandestine arrival of the Officer (Alex Givens) near the conclusion, the actors throughout this production put forth an excellent example of theatrical dialogue as they navigate the timeless waters of societal morality while

perfectly connecting with a modern audience. Instructed by vocal coach John Patrick, the dialogue the characters partake in is constantly interspersed with rhyming speech, particularly in moments of back and forth debate during a certain conflict among characters. These incorporations of rhyming couplets allow for the play to smoothly flow, which are especially effective when mixed with the modern slang that is utilized throughout the dialogue. No actor uses the form of slang as well as Nicole Leonard, whose sassy tone of voice and audacious personality allows for her to expertly blend the modern slang and more traditional discourse as she creates a bridge to connect with the audience. Given the energetic tempo adopted by the actors to match their amusing characters, the occasional use of comedic dialogue can also be seen manifested into dramatic irony, as the audience becomes aware of the hypocrisy surrounding Tartuffe long before certain characters onstage.

Created to reflect the social status of a wealthy and highly religious family, the scenic design for which the entirety of the play transpires around perfectly encapsulates the hypocrisy and deceit for which the characters within the performance are victims and perpetrators of. Devised by scenic designer Alexis Distler, the set of the play contains numerous depictions of the Catholic cross, including on the chairs and above the stage. These strategically designed props, in addition to the elegant chandelier casting an angelic light during certain stages of the production, combine to create a holy aura that is felt throughout the play. Even the physical shape of the stage is designed to feed into the religious theme, as the thrust stage is constructed in the shape of a cross. The purity of the set plays perfectly into the fiercely pious attitude of certain characters and serves as another avenue of irony given the deceit and religious hypocrisy that resides in the heart of the story's most outwardly sanctimonious character.

Of course, none of these theatrical components would be relevant without the tremendous efforts and contributions put forth by the group of actors. Despite the actors occasionally making subtle references about the audience during the play, such as when Nicole Leonard cheekily refers to the audience as suckers, the fourth wall between the actors and audience generally stays intact. As evinced by the raunchy gestures made by Nicole Leonard as she vigorously attempted to illustrate the gloomy future that awaited Mariane (April Mae Davis) with her proposed marriage to Joey Collins as Tartuffe, certain motions and moments of dialogue were exaggerated to provide emphasis to the comedic irony of the play. Even the casting of the actors played a significant role in advancing the message of the production, as dramaturge Adam Versényi notes that “Director Saheem Ali’s casting of Orgon and Tartuffe, the duped and the duper, as white men while everyone else in the household is of color, expands Molière’s investigation into how the various uses of religion interact with questions of gender race, and sexuality”. By judiciously casting each actor as part of a microcosm for a continuously evolving society, director Saheem Ali provides a platform for the audience to explore social conflicts that society grapples with today.

After personally experiencing the flood of contrasting emotions and philosophical innuendos that emitted through the various dramatical and productional elements installed by the creative team, I could not help but feel enlightened as I walked away from the Paul Green Theater with my mind racing to comprehend the lessons behind the spectacle that I had just witnessed. While this twenty-first-century adaption of a classical play is filled with moments of pulsating action, comedic verbal exchanges and energizing instances of song and dance, the subtle illuminations regarding the types of hypocrisy that encompass our society demonstrate that this production is certainly more than just a fun source of entertainment. Given the intense

social battle happening throughout the modern world that seeks to push and redefine certain traditional staples of society, the concept of identifying the deception in one's culture has never been more relevant than it is today. Rather than continue to live life in ignorance as imposters similar to Tartuffe continue to prosper at the expense of others, we can learn from this production of *Tartuffe* that no amount of deceit can overshadow the genuine pursuit of the truth.

Works Cited

Program for *Molière's Tartuffe* at the Paul Green Theatre in the Joan H. Gillings Center of Dramatic Art, North Carolina. Playmakers Repertory Company, 2018.