

## Foreword by Paddy Gormley

*Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* is late Molière, written in 1670, just three years before his death, and after more than a decade working under the patronage of Louis XIV. It is perhaps one of the best known Molière play-titles, all of which date from that same period of fifteen years. And yet it is far from the best known of Molière's works.

It does not deserve to be so neglected. *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* is, after all, the only Molière play to address the evergreen issue of social climbing. Accordingly, it cannot be excluded from the canon of Molière's satires on human foibles—misanthropy, hypocrisy, miserliness, hypochondria, and so on. But this is not its sole recommendation.

The relative neglect of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* probably stems from the fact that it is not just a play, but a comédie-ballet—a music theatre spectacular for the court of Louis XIV. The king's patronage also embraced the Italian born composer Jean-Baptiste Lully, and *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* is probably the most famous collaboration between Molière and Lully.

But the extent of this collaboration presents a daunting challenge for 21st century theatre producers. In addition to the large cast of actors that is a familiar feature of 17th century plays, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* also calls for extravagant musical resources, including a grand assemblage of instruments.

No less importantly, the structure of the piece is out of step with the expectations of modern theatre audiences. The first act is a musical entertainment, led by Jourdain's (the social climber's) music and dancing masters. The second act features Jourdain's dancing, fencing and philosophy lessons. The plot does not begin to unfold until the third act. Or should I say plots? The two main story-lines, whilst they both stem from Jourdain's gullibility, are not strictly interconnected.

The lesser of these concerns his deception by Dorante, a count, who funds his extravagant courtship of the marquise Dorimène by borrowing money from Jourdain. Dorante persuades Jourdain that he is merely acting as a go-between, trying to arouse the marquise's interest in Jourdain: a liaison with Dorimène might be just the

thing to elevate Jourdain to the courtly circles to which he aspires. The pay-off scene, in which Jourdain hosts a dinner for Dorimène that ends disastrously, is wickedly funny and not to be missed.

The main story, insofar as it takes up more than twice the playing time of the Dorimène plot, is concerned with the marriage of Jourdain's daughter Lucile. Jourdain refuses the suit of Cléonte, dismissing him as insufficiently high born. Cleonte's valet Covielle plays up to Jourdain's social aspirations by telling him that Lucile is to marry the Grand Turk's son—Cléonte in disguise—and that Jourdain is to be elevated to the right royal rank of Mamamouchi. Again it's great fun, and of no small relevance in the present age, when appearances often seem to bear greater weight than substance.

Jourdain's down-to-earth wife and cheeky servant Nicole play their parts in both these plots, trying to make the social climber see the stupidity of his actions, undermining his relationship with Dorante and, finally, exploiting his gullibility by throwing their weight behind the Grand Turk deception.

The action between Jourdain and his wife includes a pleasing illustration of Molière's willingness to make fun of himself. Madame Jourdain reminds her social climbing husband that his father was a tradesman—a seller of cloth. It is surely no coincidence that Molière's own father, Jean Poquelin, was an upholsterer, who bought his way into the royal court.

In adapting *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, I have concentrated on telling the story within the two-act structure that is more familiar to present-day audiences, ensuring that the audience goes out to the interval wanting more, and returns to be immediately caught up in a new plot development. There is still plenty of scope for music, but music no longer dominates the action.

The first act exposes Jourdain's fixation with social climbing, introduces Mme Jourdain and the servant Nicole, and sets up the two main plots. The second act brings everything to a conclusion.

The revised structure also spreads the plot lines more evenly within the play. Whereas the marriage-and-Grand-Turk plot dominates the second half of Molière's play, it begins much sooner in *The Social Climber*. This strikes me as more satisfactory from a dramatic

point of view, since it gives a better suggestion of the passing of time between Cléonte's rejection, the hatching of the Grand Turk plot, and the investiture and nuptials.

The action is punctuated by three scenes based on acts 1 & 2 of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, detailing Jourdain's interactions with his tutors. Whilst these scenes might seem peripheral, being unconnected with the story of the play, it occurs to me that they are important elements in the story of Molière. Jourdain demonstrates his ineptitude at music, dancing, fencing and philosophy. It is as if Molière were toadying up to his royal patron by suggesting that the lower orders are unworthy of such pursuits as fit a king. Molière certainly had good reason to be thankful for Louis XIV, whose loyal patronage continued despite the fact that Molière's exposure of others' duplicity and self-deceit had made him many enemies.

I also like to think that, in the first act of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, Molière was poking fun at his collaborator, Jean-Baptiste Lully, by suggesting that Jourdain's music master was in it for the money. The resemblance between Lully and the Music Master, as imagined by costume designer Michael Baldwin (p. 29), is entirely intentional.

Finally, a few words about the verse. *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* is largely written in prose, with only the musical numbers in verse. My translation is entirely in rhyming verse, and almost all in lines of just two and three feet. I find that rhyming lines of dimeter and trimeter keep things moving along briskly. The shortness of the lines also means that phrases are often enjambed over two or three lines. Accordingly, my translation concentrates on the sense of the piece, while the rhymes are of relatively minor importance. For this reason, I invariably encourage actors to deliver my text as if it were prose, so that the audience is not distracted by the constant workings of rhythms and rhymes.