

BITING SATIRE IN A FLAMBOYANT COMEDY

By [Kester Freriks](#) published 5 December 2017

Human beings like to be duped – that’s about as simple as you can get when trying to characterise the plays of the French satirist and actor Molière (1622-1673). His characters live in simulacra, imagining themselves to be rich or sick, kings or aristocrats. The Flemish theatre company Stan has brought us a double bill by the playwright, the character comedy *L’Avaro* (The Miser, 1668) and the *comédie-ballet* *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (The Middleclass Aristocrat, 1670). The combination of the two is surprising and, from a theatrical perspective, a brilliant discovery, as the two plays both complement and reflect each other while the characters seem to flow effortlessly between the two comedies. The actors stand on a raised wooden stage with the audience seated to the left and right. While the spectators are not a part of the show, they do serve as a sounding board. For the rest the stage set is as good as empty, aside from one-off intimations such as a chandelier or a red velvet curtain set far back from the action. Willy Thomas tackles the lead in *L’Avaro* while Damiaan De Schrijver does duty in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. Both comedies are collected under the title *Poquelin II*, a follow-up to the 2003 *Poquelin* about a severe hypochondriac, *Le Malade Imaginaire* (The Imaginary Invalid).

The theatre company Stan is renowned for its top notch comedies, presented by an array of exceptional actors. I’ll list all of them: Els Dottermans, Jolente De Keersmaecker, Damiaan De Schrijver, Willy Thomas, Kuno Bakker, Stijn Van Opstal and Frank Vercruyssen. The minimalist décor, exactly as stipulated by the famed director Peter Brook, is more than enough to give the spirituality of the dialogue and action all the allure and flamboyancy it requires. In *L’Avaro*, Thomas in the lead perfectly portrays the paranoia of the miser through much wringing of hands and exaggerated panic attacks. But there is more going on: the Scrooge-like character uses his money (or rather his miserly gains) to stage wedding scenes between him and Mariane, who only falls in love with older men. In the meantime he marries off his daughter to the first suitor who wants her without a dowry. Jolente De Keersmaecker uses her feminine brilliance to interpret her role as Elise, the daughter who was squandered by her father.

Molière excels at asides, and actors De Keersmaecker and Dottermans are masters when it comes to this theatrical technique. In *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* Dottermans takes on the role of Mr Jourdain’s wife. He is a well-off citizen who wishes to climb to the level of nobility, for which purpose he measures both his knowledge (philosophy, fencing, ballet, music and literature) as well as himself for a new suit. Adorned in ridiculous garb, Damiaan De Schrijver takes centre-stage utterly full of himself. He is much derided, and when he invites the noblewoman of his dreams for dinner, Mrs Jourdain (Els Dottermans) makes her inimitable entry – shrieking and driven crazy by her husband’s whims. And when he is led to believe that the Sultan of Turkey’s son wants to marry his daughter he fancies himself a Grand Turk. It is at this point that the comedy becomes biting.

In *Poquelin II* Stan demonstrates, as part of a coproduction with Toneelhuis/Olympique Dramatique, Dood Paard, NTGent and Arsenaal/Lazarus, that pure and genuine comedies together with all its stylistic devices can be raised into an art form. I have one minor criticism in that occasionally the production became farce for farce’s sake. I have previously seen Molière comedies that were anything but farcical, leaning more towards pitch black and dark comedy. There were times when there could have been just a little more depth in *Poquelin* and I would have liked to see greater tragedy on the part of the grotesque leads,

but that does not detract from the fact that the comedy style has been beautifully retained as a wonderfully light and mocking genre.