

Flemish actors present hilarious Molière production

Theatre - Poquelin II

REVIEW Using the tried-and-tested Flemish approach and a cast of excellent actors, this Molière production is a hilarious presentation. Damiaan De Schrijver is in particular inimitably fun and over the top. Everything about him breathes Molière.

By: Hein Janssen 4 December 2017, 02:00

THE PLAYWRIGHT

After all this time he remains a popular feature in the theatre, especially in France and Belgium: Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, better known as Molière, the 17th century French playwright who wrote a number of plays that dealt with human shortcomings in a masterful and comic way. Adultery, avarice, small-mindedness, idleness, suppressed lust – Molière threw everything and the kitchen sink into his plays, which today we would label as socially engaged satires. *L'Avare*, for example, deals with an old man who is so miserly that he ruins every opportunity for a little happiness in his life, while *Tartuffe* deals with a manipulative seducer and *Le Malade Imaginaire* is about a notorious poseur who so exaggerates his illness that he drives his family to misfortune.

Molière's plays frequently ridicule the elite – scientists, artists and the nobility are all subjected to his merciless mockery. Ironically, it was amongst those elites that he was so extraordinarily popular in his day, all the way up to the court of Louis XIV. In that sense he is comparable to a satirist such as Youp van 't Hek, who mocked the petit bourgeoisie in the Carré Theatre, which was sold out with his target audience laughing heartily at his sniping. Molière's stylistic device is likewise exaggeration, with the miser not just miserly but also extremely small-minded, and the misanthropist (*Le Misanthrope*) so fanatically searching for truth that he is unable to sustain himself. People, after all, are more inclined towards half-truths.

There is a considerable tradition of Molière in Dutch theatre, and I recall a virtuoso performance by Lou Landré as *Le Misanthrope* at De Appel, a terrifying Gees Linnebank in *L'Avare* at Het Nationale Toneel and the lewd fantasy of *Tartuffe* at De Paarden-kathedraal. Strangely enough, he does not feature much here at the moment, but fortunately we still have our neighbours to the south.

THE SHOW

No less than six Flemish theatre companies and producers will tonight be starting a brief tour of the Netherlands with their Poquelin II production. Two-and-a-half hours of Molière with *L'Avare* (1668) and *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670) as the starting point. With much adaptation the plays guarantee a whole evening of high-quality comedy. One of the plays deals with an intense miser and the other one with an extraordinarily rich man who so wants to be a nobleman that he'll stop at nothing to gain approval from the upper classes. He takes dancing and music lessons, learns to fence, studies philosophy and employs a tailor. But a series of misunderstandings and mistaken identities causes all his plans to fall apart.

Poquelin II is staged using the tried and tested Flemish method of the dress-up box, out of which a wide array of outfits appears. The actors constantly change roles, and while it can sometimes all become incomprehensible, they get away with it because all the acts

essentially deal with one thing: you want to belong somewhere but your own limitations stop you, and meanwhile you're longing for somebody other than the person that fate allotted to you.

The décor consists of a wooden square that serves as a stage, behind which are hung enormous red velvet curtains and two large chandeliers – it will be hard to find a more efficient stage set. When the show was put on in Bruges this weekend a sold-out hall – young, old, the bourgeoisie and the mindless masses alike – love the 17th century drama to the full. It was extraordinary.

THE ACTORS

Molière was not only a playwright, he also acted and often took on the lead role in his own plays. That is most likely why actors to this day love his work – it is perfect entertainment material. The theatre company STAN (one of the co-producers of Poquelin II) put on Poquelin in 2002, which also featured a couple of reworked Molière plays. Evidently it proved moreish to them, which is why we now have this follow-up performance.

This time the cast consist of actors from a range of companies, including Els Dottermans (NTGent), Kuno Bakker (Dood Paard), Stijn van Opstal (Toneelhuis) and of course the cream of STAN, amongst whom are Jolente De Keersmaecker, Frank Vercruyssen and Damiaan De Schrijver. While not detracting from the other actors, Damiaan De Schrijver – a colossus of a man with his grotesque beard – is matchlessly fun, rough, over the top and simply great. Everything about him exudes Molière, comedy, the theatre and eagerness. In *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* he gives us the hilarious highpoints during his dancing and fencing lessons. Els Dottermans also excels as a full-fledged comedian in a range of witty female roles, and the always stylish Jolente De Keersmaecker provides a calming balance. Stijn van Opstal is particularly good as the patient languages and philosophy teacher.

When a Turkish consul appears on the stage towards the end, Poquelin II goes off the rails and the fun becomes very noisy with flashy acting. But on the other hand, top gear is top gear, and that's what it's about in this genre of perfect comedy.