

British Theatre Guide

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The Miser

Molière, translated & adapted by Robert Cogo-Fawcett & Braham Murray
Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester
(2009)

Opening the autumn season, former *Play School* presenter Derek Griffiths stars as Harpagon, the eponymous miser, in this new adaptation of Molière's classic comedy by Robert Cogo-Fawcett and artistic director Braham Murray.

Everybody knows that Harpagon has a large amount of money stashed away somewhere, but he denies it and never spends anything on himself or his children. His son Cléante and his daughter Elise both fall in love: Cléante with the lovely Mariane who is from a poorer family that cannot afford a dowry and Elise with Valère who is a humble steward to Harpagon but hints at nobility in his blood.

When Harpagon announces to his children that he is to marry Mariane himself that very night after matchmaker Frosine helps him with the arrangements, Cléante is forced into action quickly but has to borrow money urgently, but the transaction doesn't go quite according to plan. The ending is, of course, happy, but only through a series of ridiculously-contrived coincidences and rediscovered lost family members such as those used since to great comic effect by Oscar Wilde in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Joe Orton in *What The Butler Saw* amongst others.

This production runs for less than two hours including the interval, and, unlike many adaptations of old comedies, the plot remains intelligible and logical if rather absurd. The performances emphasise the light and popular comic side of Molière from his Commedia del'Arte influence rather than the darker, brooding themes that director Helena Kaut-Howson talks about in the programme, which perhaps is what caused her to part company with the Royal Exchange at a late stage of rehearsals.

Derek Griffiths, as expected by anyone who has seen him in previous comic roles at the Exchange, is absolutely superb as Harpagon, creating a physical and emotional grotesque of a man with his hilarious antics. Watch out if you are on the front row you may get a little more involved than you bargained for in a superbly-executed and very natural bit of interaction with the audience from Griffiths in the second act.

Danny Lee Wynter is also excellent as a camp, emotional Cléante, every bit the 'peacock' that he is referred to as by others. Simon Gregor gives an amazingly physical and very funny performance as Cléante's manservant La Fleche. Helen Atkinson Wood brings a touch of Mrs Miggins a part she played in TV's *Blackadder* to the role of Frosine, which she executes perfectly. Charlie Walker-Wise is solid and laid back as Valère but doesn't always get the humour in his lines across, and Julian Chagrin creates a funny physical performance as cook and coachman Jacques but stumbled over his words a bit. The other members of the twelve-strong cast work very well together to create physical grotesque characters of servants and others.

The fascinating and detailed design by Ashley Martin-Davis looks like a cross between a crumbling stately home and a hospital, with plastic sheeting, paint-spattered servants, metal gurneys and floorboards that are broken at the edges to reveal white-glazed tiles underneath and treasure hidden between them, and strong punk influences to the design of the non-servant main characters.

While neither the adaptation nor the production will go down in history as classics, this is a light, short, funny and well-executed piece of very entertaining nonsense.

Running to 3rd October

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)