

SPECIAL FEATURES

***Tartuffe* Is a Weapon In This Dark Age of Misinformation and Fake News**

Tony winners André De Shields and Matthew Broderick are leading two different Off-Broadway productions, showing how Molière's farce is unfortunately timely.

BY MARGARET HALL
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Amber Iman and André De Shields in *André De Shields is Tartuffe* (Joan Marcus)

If you don't laugh, you'll cry.

Tartuffe, Molière's farce filled with political and sexual hypocrisy, is having a moment. First performed in 1664, two different translations of Molière's original French text are coming to the Off-Broadway stage this autumn, with Tony winner André De Shields starring in a hyper-intimate production (for just 100 people) at the House of the Redeemer through November 23. Then immediately after, Tony winner Matthew Broderick will step into the titular robes at New York Theatre Workshop November 28–January 11, 2026.

But what is it that is drawing people toward this 361-year-old play? Well, the plot speaks for itself.

The play follows an unscrupulous man named Tartuffe as he descends upon the family of a powerful-yet-inept man named Orgon. Presenting as a pious man of God, Tartuffe says everything Orgon wants to hear, ingratiating himself as the man's guiding idol while robbing him blind. As Orgon's family tries in vain to prove that Tartuffe is nothing but a charlatan, Orgon digs in his heels, refusing to admit that he has been duped.

Sounds like anything you've witnessed lately?

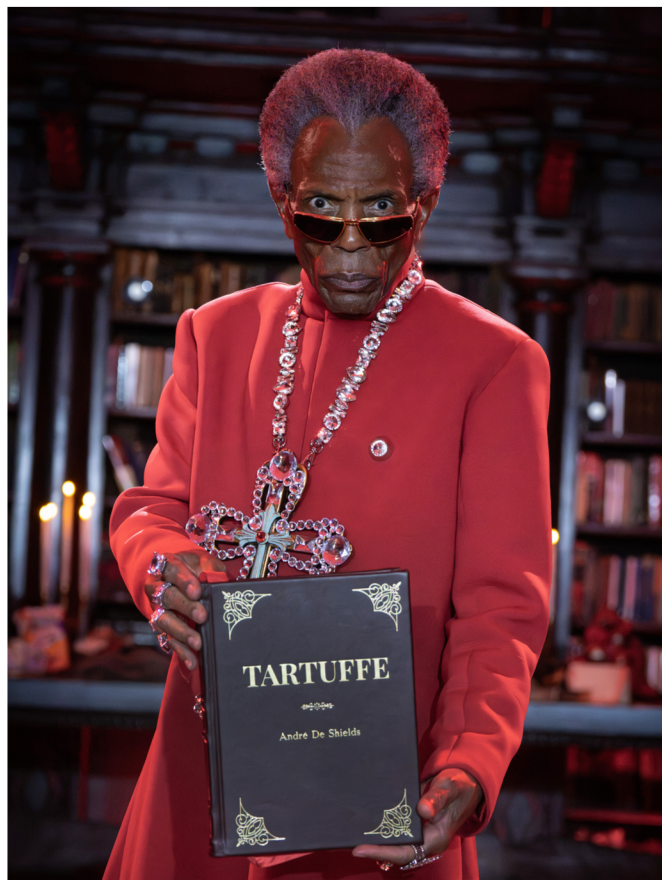
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"The second election night 2026 happened, I realized 'oh my gosh, it's happening right now,'" shared Keaton Wooden, director of the House of the Redeemer production. "We're watching Tartuffe play out on a national scale."

It's no surprise that a revival of interest in Tartuffe has accompanied political strife. When the piece first premiered, it was actively suppressed by King Louis XIV on behalf of his confessor, Paul Philippe Hardouin de Beaumont de Péréfixe—the Archbishop of Paris rejected the perceived progressive ideals of truth depicted in the work. It is an inherently confronting play, bourgeois in its democratic, community-focused approach to toppling hypocritical figures who wield power like a weapon over their people.

For those bourgeois reasons, the play became a favorite of the Comédie-Française, the oldest active theatre company in the world. Since the French Revolution, the piece has become the most-performed play in the company's history, regularly speaking truth to power as it has established itself as one of the most popular French language plays of all time: so popular, in fact, that the name Tartuffe has become a slang term to call out a hypocrite who feigns virtue, particularly religious virtue.



André De Shields in Tartuffe



Michael O'Sullivan in Tartuffe

Its French language origins have kept it from achieving the same wide-reaching success in English markets; it is a whole lot easier for an upstart English language company to pick up a Shakespeare text than a Molière. It took 300 years for the play to make it to Broadway, when Michael O'Sullivan took on the title role in 1965 under the guidance of the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center.

The production was a hit, with a translation by Richard Wilbur that quickly became the default English translation for companies across the United States throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Wilbur's version was not free of scrutiny, however. Much of Molière's wordplay was lost in translation, removing a significant amount of humor from the piece. Purists also balked at the shift in form to the piece's structure. As written by Molière, the play is entirely rendered in rhyming couplets with 12 syllable lines; Wilbur's dogged effort to maintain that pattern, despite English's different vocabulary and sentence structure, let to him often sacrificing the depth and subtlety of Molière's tale in favor of forcing a rhyme or rhythm. The result was a piece that, to many, felt far more old fashioned than was necessary

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Wilbur's translation was brought back to Broadway twice, in 1977 with John Wood and in 2003 with Henry Goodman, with both productions failing to cross the 100 performance threshold. These Wilbur productions were all period pieces, presenting the tale in the 17th century without drawing explicit connections between the work and current politics, even while it was internally acknowledged that the 1977 production was inspired by the state of American politics post Watergate, and the 2003 inspired by the hypocritical hyper-religiosity of America post 9/11.

For many producers, that resistance to drawing connections was financially motivated: The rich and powerful rarely react positively to being lampooned. A 1996 Broadway production, with a new translation by Freyda Thomas that set the piece in a television station in the American South, with *Tartuffe* reimagined as a televangelist, was killed on arrival. Starring John Glover, the production failed to achieve 30 performances.

Now, as the country fractures further and further into factions, political theatre of every stripe has popped up to interrogate the gap, and question how it might be repaired. Questions of honesty, integrity, shame, and faith are at the top of everyone's mind as the internet is ushering in a dark age of misinformation and profitable lies.



Amber Iman, Phoebe Dunn, Todd Buonopane, Tyler Hardwick, and Hannah Beck in *André De Shields is Tartuffe* (Joan Marcus)

Much of the historical preciousness toward protecting the power class has been shattered over the last decade, with audiences now hungry to call out the hypocrisy we live under. In response, new translators have stepped up to the plate to transform Molière's original French text into English, finding the humor while maintaining the original structure, and infusing a fair amount of contemporary bite.

For the House of the Redeemer production, a translation by British playwright Ranjit Bolt is in use, while the New York Theatre Workshop production will premiere a brand-new translation by Tony-nominated playwright Lucas Hnath. Both productions promise fresh looks at the ways in which the truth can be twisted, and why we are all susceptible to believing a beautiful lie, on both sides of the political spectrum.

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"I personally have this vision that Tartuffe should be sort of part of the capital C canon of American theatre," shares Wooden. "The French and the Americans have a lot in common with regard to how they react to populism. There's a Tartuffe figure in every religion, every kind of politics, every belief system, because ultimately, everyone is in danger of following someone that says all the right things, but secretly is not doing the right things. And these new translations unlock that to American audiences."

Clever casting also unlocks the wide resonance of the piece in 2025. It is no mistake that both the House of the Redeemer and New York Theatre Workshop productions have cast high-profile performers in the title role—performers who are known for their ability to sway public opinion in their favor, be it André de Shield's mythic presence as one of the American theatre's most expressive elders, or Matthew Broderick's "aw shucks" mischievous public persona that he has been honing since adolescence. Both have also excelled at playing charlatans, whether it was de Shield's deceptive Wizard in *The Wiz* or Broderick's opportunistic Leo Bloom in *The Producers*.

"Tartuffe is the ultimate villain and the ultimate performer. His entire power lies in his ability to put on such a good show that you forget that he's full of shit," Wooden states, chuckling darkly. "André has sort of a meta power over our community that is useful, to make people realize that they are susceptible to influence as well."

Molière's work is a several-centuries-strong reminder that humanity has been here before, and survived it. While the original play was written as a send-up of corrupt Catholic officials, in the 21st century it has been used to expose conservative movements that require piety from all except themselves. When looking at the news these days, it is easy to despair. At least these productions offer you a way to laugh at it all, even for a few hours.

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Hannah Beck and André De Shields in *André De Shields is Tartuffe*

Joan Marcus



Drew Wutke, Phoebe Dunn, Alexandra Socha, and Charlie Lubeck in *André De Shields is Tartuffe*

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