

VOGUE

ARTS

On Opposite Ends of Manhattan, a Tale of Two *Tartuffes*

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André De Shields stars in a production of *Tartuffe* at House of the Redeemer through November 23. A separate production, starring Matthew Broderick, begins performances at New York Theatre Workshop on November 28. Photo: Ashley Pena

Swindling hypocrites are having a moment this season. Two distinct off-Broadway productions of the 1664 Molière play *Tartuffe*—in which an ingratiating, self-righteous fraud cons a wealthy French aristocrat out of house and home—bookend each other this month: one production, starring André De Shields, will end its run November 23 at House of the Redeemer on East 95th Street; the other, adapted by Lucas Hnath (*A Doll's House, Part 2*; *Dana H.*), stars Matthew Broderick and begins previews at the New York Theatre Workshop on the 28th.

The teams behind both shows—which only became aware of each other over the summer—welcome the concurrence. “I believe in the gods of serendipity. That’s not chance. That’s not luck. That is the belief that what belongs to you is on its way to you and cannot miss you unless you deliberately avoid it,” De Shields proclaims, in cosmic terms, of this season of Tar-two-ffes.

“Hopefully there are enough New Yorkers that we can both do it,” offers Broderick. “I think the town is big enough. I hope so.”



Associate director Wasif Sami, director Sarah Benson, and playwright Lucas Hnath in rehearsals for *Tartuffe* at New York Theatre Workshop. Photo: Marcus Middleton



Amber Iman and André De Shields in *Tartuffe* at House of the Redeemer. Photo: Joan Marcus

De Shields was apprised of the NYTW production when he went to see *Maybe Happy Ending* with his good friend and *Hadestown* costar Amber Gray in June. “She says, ‘Guess what I’m going to be doing?’ I said, ‘What?’ She said, ‘*Tartuffe*, and I’m going to be Elmire.’ I had to bite my tongue. And I said, ‘That’s wonderful.’ And she said, ‘What are you up to?’ I almost exploded with laughter.” As it happens, De Shields’s Elmire—wife of Orgon, *Tartuffe*’s gullible victim—is also played by an Amber: Amber Iman.

Both productions began preparations last fall, with Keaton Wooden, the uptown director, getting in touch with De Shields for a reading and Sarah Benson, the NYTW director, asking Hnath if he would be interested in reworking the piece.

For Wooden, who grew up the son of a minister in Indiana, the idea of doing *Tartuffe* had been kicking around for a while. “Once 2016 hit, I felt like we were really living *Tartuffe*. America has always had a pretty dangerous religious wing to itself. Whenever faith and power merge together, it is a dangerous result.” The character of *Tartuffe* exploits religion and false piety to inveigle himself into Orgon’s confidences—much to the horror of Elmire and their children, who see right through him.

Of Molière's works, *Tartuffe* is perhaps less celebrated and produced than, say, *The Misanthrope*, *The Miser*, or *The Imaginary Invalid*, making this season's double-act all the more curious. Or is it? From Delvey to Donald, scammers of every stripe abound these days. "We are now at a point where people have to be reminded about not only the hypocrisy under which we are forced to live, but our own hypocrisy. If you sit there and experience this play and don't think of Trumpism and how it is raping American democracy, then we are not doing our work," De Shields says.

On that note: The two productions diverge in their handling of the current administration. "One of my concerns initially is that I'm not that interested in a version of the play that does an easy equation of *Tartuffe* equals Trump, which I know is the expectation to a certain degree," says Hnath. "I also found that I had a little hesitation around the one take on the play that is to sort of make Christianity an easy target, which I actually don't think the play is even inherently trying to do.... It's a play about belief and how people decide what they believe. It's a play about stubbornness."



Molière performing *Tartuffe* at the salon of Ninon de l'Enclos. Photo: Getty Images



David Cross and Matthew Broderick in rehearsals for *Tartuffe* at New York Theatre Workshop.
Photo: Marcus Middleton

Hnath had already been thinking of writing a play in the style of Molière when Benson emailed him last September. “I had a file on my computer called ‘Molière plays,’ where I had been putting some writing towards an idea about a play in his style,” Hnath says. After sending other writers Benson’s way, he kept dabbling for a couple of months before eventually signing on himself. “I basically worked on it every day for nine months. It was intense and it was the most fun I’ve had in a long time working on anything.” At the same time, he was putting together a writers’ room for the Apple TV show The Dealer, his first television project.

Working from an English translation from the 1930s by the felicitously-named Curtis Hidden Page, Hnath went line by line, parsing each sentence’s meaning and then coming up with rhymes or slant rhymes to form couplets, triplets, and so on. The translation used by the uptown production, by Ranjit Bolt from 2003, is all in rhyming couplets.

Adapting the piece while casting was ongoing allowed Hnath to write with specific actors in mind, particularly Broderick, David Cross (who plays Orgon), and the drag performer Roy Haylock—a.k.a. Bianca Del Rio—who plays the elderly Madame Pernelle and opens the play. “My touchpoint into understanding how scene one would work was, well, the library is open and she’s going to read everybody for filth,” says Hnath with a laugh of the latter character. “I started writing it in Bianca’s voice, but I thought, There’s no universe in which she is going to do this.”

For Broderick, a two-time Tony winner, the intimacy of the 199-seat NYTW space—and the rangy group of actors and other creatives, including choreographer Raja Feather Kelly and composer Heather Christian, attached to Benson’s production—represent a welcome change. “I’ve been doing this a long time, so I very often work with friends and people who I know,” he says. “This is a little bit going outside of that. That’s exciting.”

For De Shields’s part, *Tartuffe* belonged to “the European canon of antagonists and protagonists” that he was eager to master early in his career. “That has a lot to do with what I wasn’t considered appropriate for or allowed to dream about,” he says. “What I did as a young man was make sure that I would be literate, so that my would-be oppressor would always understand what I am saying, and I would always understand what my would-be oppressor was not saying, you got me?”

At 79, De Shields is in full flower (the official name of the production is *André De Shields Is Tartuffe*, after all)—seducing Iman’s Elmore, dropping for a few push-ups, and serenading the audience with an invigorating rendition of Nina Simone’s “Feeling Good.” (Cleverly, he often has a scripture-slash-script at hand, in case he needs a line or “bible verse.”) “It’s like we are hosting a party and then we do a show during the party,” explains Wooden.

All of this is experienced at close range in the baroque library of Redeemer, a Beaux-Arts mansion built by a Vanderbilt heiress and later deeded to the Episcopal Church. Wooden chose the space both for its resemblance to a 17th-century French chateau and because the money to rent it would go toward a spiritually minded nonprofit.

A view that both *Tartuffes* share is of the rich dramatic and comic possibilities in watching a sucker get conned, whatever comparisons one chooses to project onto it. “*Tartuffe* is small-time. He’s really just stealing money from one family,” says Broderick. “This isn’t about a guy taking over a nation or anything, hopefully. But I know that happens too.”