

THE HEIR APPARENT

BY DAVID IVES

ADAPTED FROM
LE LÉGATAIRE UNIVERSEL
BY JEAN-FRANÇOIS REGNARD



DRAMATISTS
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INC.

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World Premiere Produced by
Shakespeare Theatre Company
Washington, DC
Michael Kahn Chris Jenning
Artistic Director Managing Director

September 11, 2011

*This play is for Michael Kahn,
in gratitude and admiration,
and because it made him laugh.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

or: *Meeting Monsieur Regnard*

Voltaire said, “Whoever doesn't enjoy Regnard doesn't deserve to admire Molière.”

Now there's a puff line to put on a theatre marquee.

Consider these tidbits from the life of Jean-François Regnard: First, that as your average young man of twenty-three gadding about the world, he was taken prisoner in 1778 by Algerian pirates; sold into slavery; did six months' hard labor; got ransomed; and when he arrived home hung his slave-chains on the wall in his Paris house. Second, that after a cushy Treasury job, he launched himself as a comic playwright at age thirty-eight and became the Next Big Thing after Molière. Third, that after he'd been buried one hundred and twenty-five years, some kids found his skeleton when his local church was being renovated, and the kids used his skull as a projectile.

In other words, Regnard had an archetypal career as a playwright: a slave while alive, a football when dead.

Add to this that he was loved by all who knew him; that he made a great portion of his fortune on a gambling spree (he wrote a fine play called *The Gambler*); and that, passing through Lapland, he caused a furor because of his uncontrollable laughter at a typical Lapp funeral. His name is cognate with *renard*, the French word for fox, and he lived up to it. “*Il faut par notre esprit faire notre destin*,” Crispin says in *The Heir Apparent*. “It's with our wits that we create our fates.”

The buoyancy with which Regnard lived is so intrinsic to his art that the man and his work are one. The play at hand (from 1708, titled *Le Légataire universel*) is worldly, utterly honest, satirical without being condemnatory, often bawdy, sometimes scatological, now and then macabre, and it craves jokes as a drunkard craves his liquor. Like a drunkard, the play will do anything to find the liquor, as Regnard goes off on knockabout detours hunting for laughs — not out of desperation but out of brio. Granted, some of *Heir* is a shameless rip-off of Molière's *Imaginary Invalid*. But is there anything in *Le Malade imaginaire* to match the servant Crispin's inspired impersonations?

Because Regnard was writing as French classical theatre was heading into a century of much different character, the verse dialogue is more conversational than Molière's, the concerns more bourgeois, while the farce is turned up (as they say in *Spinal Tap*) all the way to eleven. One can draw a straight line from *Légataire* to Feydeau's middle-class nightmares, and straight from there, or should I say down from there, to TV sitcoms. And what could be more up-to-date than his characters' almost feral obsession with money?

When Michael Kahn sent me *Le Légataire universel* to look at for possible adaptation for D.C.'s Shakespeare Theatre Company, I had never heard of Regnard. Yet, just as when Michael had sent me Corneille's *Le Menteur* two years previously (which became *The Liar*, which became Michael's priceless production, which turned out to be the most fun I ever had working on any play) I needed only a single reading to know that I had to take on the piece. The off-color jokes made me howl even while I marveled at Regnard's facility at rendering them in graceful yet conversational couplets.

The original Washington production (God bless Michael Kahn!) had a pig in it. I mean, an actual pig onstage. For the New York production at Classic Stage Company, brilliantly directed by John Rando, I cut the pig and made a number of other revisions here and there, as time had taught me where the play needed tightening and/or embellishment. I also learned immensely from Carson Elrod, the comic genius who played Crispin to perfection in both productions.

How to bring the play into English? I took it as my job, while pruning some of his more extravagant asides, to mirror Regnard's restless inventiveness and tumbling action. As with *The Liar*, I took my liberties. Among other things, I beefed up Isabelle and Madame Argante, both of whom disappear in the original for the bulk of the play. Geronte held such delicious comic possibilities I probably almost doubled his part. I extended the Geronte-versus-Eraste marriage complication and embellished the impersonations that are the play's set pieces. Finally I attempted a more satisfying ending, since the original — like many French plays of that period — simply stops, abruptly, just when we expect a final cascade of unravelings and recognitions.

Working with (I won't say "on") Regnard has been a delight, for he's been, as he was in life, the best of company. As Lady Mary Wortley Montagu said of Henry Fielding: "It is a pity he was not immortal, he was so formed for happiness." Wouldn't it be wonderful if Regnard could be raised from his tomb — not to be a genial, cranial plaything this time, but to take his rightful place in the English-speaking theatre as a master of comedy, for gaiety ran in his veins as his birthright.

"*Les gens d'esprit n'ont point besoin de précepteur,*" says Crispin in a line I didn't include. "True wits don't need a tutor." In that sense, Regnard was a natural.

THE HEIR APPARENT was first performed by Shakespeare Theatre Company (Michael Kahn, Artistic Director; Chris Jennings, Managing Director) at the Lansburgh Theatre in Washington, D.C., where it opened on September 11, 2011. It was directed by Michael Kahn; the set design was by Alexander Dodge; the costume design was by Murell Horton; the lighting design was by Philip Rosenberg; the sound design was by Christopher Baine; and the original music was by Adam Wernick. The cast was as follows:

ERASTE Andrew Veenstra
ISABELLE Meg Chambers Steedle
CRISPIN Carson Elrod
LISETTE Kelly Hutchinson
GERONTE Floyd King
MADAME ARGANTE Nancy Robinette
SCRUPLE Clark Middleton

THE HEIR APPARENT, with revisions incorporated in this edition, was subsequently produced in New York City by Classic Stage Company (Brian Kulick, Artistic Director; Jeff Griffin, Managing Director), opening on April 9, 2014. It was directed by John Rando; the set design was by John Lee Beatty; the costume design was by David C. Woolard; the lighting design was by Japhy Weideman; and the sound design was by Nevin Steinberg of Acme Sound Partners. The cast was as follows:

ERASTE Dave Quay
ISABELLE Amelia Pedlow
CRISPIN Carson Elrod
LISETTE Claire Karpen
GERONTE Paxton Whitehead
MADAME ARGANTE Suzanne Bertish
SCRUPLE David Pittu

CHARACTERS

(*in order of speaking*)

ERASTE (“uh-RAST”), our young hero, in love with:

ISABELLE (“IZ-uh-bel”), our charming and beautiful heroine.

CRISPIN (“kree-SPAN”), a crafty young manservant, in love with:

LISETTE (“lee-ZET”), a down-to-earth maid.

GERONTE (“zhur-AUNT”), miserly old uncle to Eraste.

MADAME ARGANTE (“ar-GAUNT”), Isabelle’s dowager mother.

SCRUPLE, a lawyer who is very, very *small*.

PLACE

Paris, the house of Geronte.

TIME

Spring 1708.

NOTES

“Madam” spelled *without* an “e” is pronounced “MAD-um.”

“Madame” *with* an “e” is pronounced “muh-DAM.”

“Eulalie” is pronounced “YOO-luh-lee.”

THE HEIR APPARENT

ACT ONE

Paris, 1708. The parlor in Geronte's house. A spring morning. A door at right to the rest of the house and doors up center toward a foyer. A window, left, with curtains and shutters. A large thronelike armchair. Some bottles and glasses filled with colored liquids. On shelves, decades of accumulated stuff. Prominent are "The Box," an ornamental chest chained to an altar-like pedestal, and a tall and odd-looking clock. The clock whirs and chimes with a strange, agitated farting noise. Lisette enters from right and throws open the curtains and shutters.

CRISPIN. (*Offstage.*)

Lisette...?

(*Crispin enters from center, breathless.*)

Lisette...!

LISETTE.

What's up, Crispin?

CRISPIN. (*Embracing her.*)

My energizer!

LISETTE.

Well, well. Since when are you an early riser?

CRISPIN.

Since working for the nephew to your miser

And there is hell to pay today, my pet.

The old man hasn't kicked the bucket yet...?

Geronte's alive? Please say he isn't dead!

LISETTE.

If you can call it life, he's out of bed.

So yes, alive and hoarding breaths like francs.

CRISPIN.

I know I never pray, but — God? My thanks!

LISETTE.

Well, God nor gold will help the old man thrive.

I thought last night would be his last alive.

Twenty-two times he fell into a swoon

And lay as limply as a pitted prune.

He only lived thanks to these brews I craft.

CRISPIN. (*Picks up one of the bottles.*)

Your über-laxative? That healing draft?

LISETTE.

I irrigated him both fore and aft.

He popped up blinking, did a quick pavane,

And hopped a polka to the closest john.

CRISPIN.

Ironic talent, making dead men dance.

LISETTE.

I'm high colonic mistress of all France.

But what's this interest in the old man's health?

CRISPIN.

My master's urgent need for all his wealth.

The gold is safe?

LISETTE. (*Indicates The Box.*)

Locked in its air-tight chest.

CRISPIN.

With luck, my master's well-deserved bequest.

LISETTE.

Dream on, Crispin. With nephews thick as flies?

Who each would rob, maim, kill, or pulverize

To get your master's piece of the estate?

CRISPIN.

Yeah, but Eraste's this money's proper mate!

And not just 'cuz he's up to here in bills.

There's now *Madame Argante*.

LISETTE.

I'm getting chills.

CRISPIN.

Two years he's pledged in stealth to Isabelle?

Last night, Eraste decides it's time to tell.

What happens but her dragon-headed mom,

The dread Madame Argante, explodes *this* bomb:
Unless Eraste is named Geronte's lone heir,
I mean *sole, solitary, single* heir,
Isabelle's history and Eraste can rot.
How'll you and I afford to tie the knot?
How'll we run off to sunny Mandalay?

LISETTE.

Then say some prayers. He makes his will *today*.
And would you like to hear how deep's his greed?
To save on writing up this crucial deed,
He hired a lawyer no taller than a creeper,
As if — because he's short? — he might come cheaper.
But wait a sec ... she's here!

CRISPIN.

Madame Argante?

LISETTE.

Since sunrise she's been holed up with Geronte.
They locked the door and blocked it with a chair
But just "by chance" I *did* hear ...

CRISPIN.

Yes?

LISETTE.

"Sole heir."

Plus lots of talk of wills and deeds and money —
With Isabelle's name neck-and-neck.

CRISPIN.

Oh, *honey!*

You don't know what that means? Farewell to dread!
They're raining money on my master's head!

(Eraste enters from center. A noose hangs around his neck.)

ERASTE.

My friends — no, please don't try to cheer me up.
All night I drank of sorrow's weary cup,
Tempted by poison, gunshot, and the rope.

(Shows the noose's label.)

The cheapest noose they had. The brand-name? "*Hope.*"

CRISPIN.

Roll up your clothesline, sir. Prepare to marry.
Madame Argante's in there.

ERASTE.

So?

CRISPIN.

Cash and carry!

Why would your uncle hang with such a pill —
Unless to craft a wedding deed-slash-will?

ERASTE.

You mean I'll get to marry Isabella?

CRISPIN.

Today you're Paris's most happy fella!

ERASTE.

So we'll be one?!

(Lets out a celebratory howl.)

CRISPIN.

Yeah, hey, the wedding's bliss,
But — Isabelle aside? — you'll have all *this*.
And stocks ... and bonds ...

ERASTE.

... and gold ...

CRISPIN.

... the plate, the crest ...

ERASTE.

That ugly clock, this ornamental chest ...
He'll settle all on me...?

CRISPIN.

You wanna bet?

ERASTE. *(Collapsing into Crispin's arms.)*

Crispin, my heart!

CRISPIN.

Hang on. You can't die yet.

Wait till you're solvent, in a gold pavilion.

LISETTE.

Riding through Paris on a silver pillion.

ERASTE.

Why not? The old man's worth *an easy MILLION!*

CRISPIN, ERASTE, and LISETTE.

A million! A million! A million!

ERASTE.

Thank God! Since each day's mail brings some new threat.

(Takes out some letters.)

“Monsieur, I’ll throw you into jail for debt.”

Or this: “Your date with the Bastille is nigh.”

But Uncle’s will could put them off me. Why?

CRISPIN, ERASTE, and LISETTE.

A million! A million! A million!

ERASTE.

But wait. What if this whole deal comes unsprung?

Some hitch, some cog, some tiny cam, or camlet?

You know my uncle. What if ...

CRISPIN.

Hey. Prince Hamlet.

The Battleaxe is in there on your side.

You got a Cadillac to smooth your ride.

(Madame Argante enters from right, unnoticed by Eraste.)

ERASTE.

You’re right. He hasn’t got a snowball’s chance.

She’ll turn him into stone with one chill glance!

This *is* the basilisk, Madame Argante!

She whom the Prince of Darkness couldn’t daunt.

She next to whom a rock looks nonchalant.

Who makes Godzilla seem a mad bacchante.

To whom Attila is a dilettante.

She who ...

MADAME ARGANTE.

Monsieur Eraste.

ERASTE.

Madame Argante.

MADAME ARGANTE.

I know what you want. Words that might un muddy

What I’ve been up to in your uncle’s study,

An explication of our tête-à-tête.

You love my daughter, don’t you? Better yet,

You crave at any cost her satisfaction?

ERASTE.

Oh, madam, I would brave Ulysses’ action!

To win her bliss I’d ape Achilles’ test!

Great Vulcan’s flame ...

MADAME ARGANTE.

Sir, lay this noise to rest,

And more important don’t intone to me

THE HEIR APPARENT

by David Ives

adapted from *Le Légataire universel*

by Jean-François Regnard

4M, 3W

Paris, 1708. Eraste, a worthy though penniless young man, is in love with the fair Isabelle, but her forbidding mother, Madame Argante, will only let the two marry if Eraste can show he will inherit the estate of his rich but miserly Uncle Geronte. Unfortunately, old Geronte has also fallen for the fair Isabelle, and plans to marry her this very day and leave her everything in his will — separating the two young lovers forever. Eraste's wily servant Crispin jumps in, getting a couple of meddling relatives disinherited by impersonating them (one a brash American, the other a French female country cousin) — only to have the old man kick off before his will is made! In a brilliant stroke, Crispin then impersonates the old man, dictating a will favorable to his master (and Crispin himself, of course) — only to find that rich Uncle Geronte isn't dead at all and is more than ever ready to marry Isabelle! The multiple strands of the plot are unraveled to great comic effect in the streaming rhyming couplets of French classical comedy, and everyone lives happily, and richly, ever after.

"THE HEIR APPARENT crackles along merrily from start to finish ... Mr. Ives freely indulges in contemporary allusion, adding a vivifying seasoning of freshness to a farcical plot."

—The New York Times

"This over-the-top farce is clever, funny, and fast ... A gem of a play."

—The Washingtonian

"The play has been transformed by Ives' verbal dexterity and uncanny ability to turn rhymed couplets into rhymed couplets extraordinaire, full of wit, bawdy humor and contemporary references."

—The Washington Examiner

Also by David Ives

VENUS IN FUR

ALL IN THE TIMING

DON JUAN IN CHICAGO

A FLEA IN HER EAR

and others

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