



THE MISER

DIRECTOR PETER EVANS

BY MOLIÈRE
A NEW VERSION
BY JUSTIN FLEMING

A HANDY GUIDE TO BLUFFING
YOUR WAY THROUGH
BY ANDY MCLEAN

BELL
SHAKESPEARE



SPEED READ

A quick flick through
The Miser

Harpagon knows better than anyone that money doesn't grow on trees. Still, he decides the safest way to stash his windfall (ten thousand gold crowns!) is by burying it in the backyard.

Now, that's some filthy lucre.

Inside Harpagon's home, meanwhile, things are similarly down and dirty. Harpagon's son, Cléante, wants to marry Mariane. Unaware of this, Harpagon decides he wants to marry Mariane himself. In the meantime, Harpagon's daughter, Élise, is loved up with the hired help, Valère. Harpagon, however, has his daughter down to marry Signor Anselm, sans dowry.

Cléante attempts to borrow money through a long line of intermediaries, only to find his father is the last shark at the end of the extortionate chain. Father/son relations become frosty.

Enter Mariane, who is simultaneously disgusted by Harpagon, and gobsmacked to discover her lover is Harpagon's son.

Harpagon spies Cléante and Mariane getting cosy, and tricks Cléante into confessing their affair. Harpagon disinherits Cléante.

A family feud. Two unwilling brides. It's a quick descent into farce. Surely, this is where Molière will invoke divine retribution and spank Harpagon's tight arse?

Cue: Cléante's valet, La Flèche, who has discovered Harpagon's loot in the backyard.

Next, the mysterious Signor Anselm arrives and declines to marry a reluctant Élise. Meanwhile, Élise's lover, Valère, is accused of stealing Harpagon's money. Mistakenly thinking she's been accused of stealing Harpagon's daughter – Valère confesses.

In a series of revelations, Valère explains she is actually a member of a well-to-do family. Mariane is Valère's long-lost sister, and Signor Anselm is their father. Harpagon agrees to give up Mariane in exchange for his missing money, and so all are united with their one true love: Cléante with Mariane, Élise with Valère, and the miser with his money.

CASHED UP AND LOVED UP

The Miser
character lowdown

HARPAGON

An old skinflint who claims to be stony broke, when he's actually stinking rich. Harpagon is constantly paranoid about being robbed or ripped off.

MARIANE

Strapped for cash. Caring for her sick mother. Unlikely to marry Cléante, the man she loves. Surely things can't get any worse for Mariane...

CLÉANTE

Harpagon's son has a heart of gold, but no access to his father's real gold. Cléante has the hots for Mariane and wants to rescue her from poverty.

ÉLISE

Harpagon's daughter is fed up with his control freakery and tight-fisted ways. So she's plucking up her courage and cooking up a plan to escape.

MASTER JACQUES

Harpagon's conniving cook and coachman.

VALÈRE

She has secured a job in Harpagon's household in order to continue a secret love affair with Élise.

SIGNOR ANSELM

Still scarred by a terrible tragedy 16 years ago, when he lost his two children in a shipwreck. Harpagon thinks wealthy Signor Anselm is perfect marriage material for Élise.

FROSINE

A wheeler dealer with a sharp eye for a quick buck.

LA FLÈCHE

Cléante's loyal and resourceful valet.

COMMISSIONER OF POLICE

Has the unenviable task of trying to keep the peace, while all around him wealthy people are scheming, misbehaving and bickering.

THE FRENCH ANSWER TO SHAKESPEARE

Given that *The Miser* was first staged in Paris in 1668, it's quite uncanny how it resonates in 21st Century Australia. "The play explores the terrible control that older people exert over young people and their lives," says playwright Justin Fleming, who has translated a number of Molière's works for Bell Shakespeare. "Young people today have so much difficulty trying to buy a house and to put a roof over their head. There's so little funds made available to them even when the funds could actually be provided by the older generation."

Director Peter Evans says *The Miser* shares a lot in common with modern comedy. "It's like a sitcom about a family unit. The antagonist is the head of the family, whose greed is blocking his kids from true love. The play so tight and brilliantly constructed – there is no fat."

Fleming adds: "The main reason the play is still popular is that it's incredibly funny. Maybe more now than for some time, we do need to have a good laugh and it's all the better if we're laughing at ourselves, at society and at the world we know. It is great to take serious subjects, such as extreme greed and hypocrisy, and laugh at them. That's the joy of comedy in a slightly troubled world."

"QUOTE UNQUOTE"

Molière preferred to write in verse, but after his tuberculosis gave him a permanent, nagging cough, it was difficult for him as an actor to speak complete lines. It's believed that this is why Molière wrote *The Miser* in prose. In present-day Australia, playwright Justin Fleming has translated *The Miser* in verse, as Molière may have done originally had he been in better health. Here's a few exclusive previews of Fleming's brand new 2019 script:

These young hunks, Mariane, are all very sexy and nice,

They'd charm the leg off an iron pot, but they're as poor as church mice.

I know it may appall the senses and offend against Cupid,

But you're better to marry a rich old bore who'll happily spoil you stupid,

But he can stuff his discretion up his crocodile; the man's clearly a snake;

I've heard of daylight robbery, but this one takes the cake.

To ignore his age and experience is a cause for serious compunction,

Given that I'm so over the moon that I can barely function.

Without the light of his wisdom, without him as my master

I could pole-vault into a bottomless pit of absolute disaster.

Look, I don't have, thank the Lord, any overt criminal leaning,

Though some of my mates sail close to the wind, if you take my meaning,

And while at all cost, the guillotine is to be eschewed,

And I fear the electric chair, where your arse gets barbecued,

Yet I must admit your father's conduct gives me the strongest temptation

To rob the crap out of him, and then go on a long vacation.



SAY WHAT?

Post-show conversation starters to make you look smart

THAT WAS THEN

Like Shakespeare, Molière borrowed liberally from other writers. In *The Miser*, Molière lifted a few characters and strands of plot from the Latin play *Aulularia* by Plautus. He also picked up plot devices from *La Belle Plaideuse* by François le Métel de Boisrobert as well as *La Mère Coquette* by Jean Donneau de Visé.

Since his death in 1673, Molière hasn't exactly rested in peace. The Church initially refused to bury his body in consecrated ground until Louis XIV intervened and Molière was buried in a chapel cemetery. (Some confusion remained about whether this particular body was actually Molière in the first place.) Then, 130 years after his death, French revolutionaries exhumed the body and, after a few years resting above ground in municipal offices, Molière's remains moved to the Museum of French Monuments. In 1817 the body was moved once more, this time to Père Lachaise Cemetery.

THIS IS NOW

Fictional misers such as Harpagon, Shylock, Fagin, and Ebenezer Scrooge have always captured the popular imagination. Playwright Justin Fleming thinks he knows why: "People who are very wealthy can be mean or they can be very generous. Molière, and the public still today, have a fascination in people who have abundance but still choose to be mean. I think it really puzzles us as to why anyone would do that."

If you told Molière in 1668 that *The Miser* would be popular centuries later, he would have been astonished. In his own lifetime, the play was widely considered to be a flop. That soon changed however, and today it is cherished by theatre lovers across the globe. In recent decades it has been adapted for film and television in France and Italy, and in 2012 it was turned into a flamboyant Indian stage musical.

Image: *The Miser* rehearsals © Prudence Upton