

# Theater at Monmouth's *French Summer of Love*

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During a tumultuous election year fraught with violence against gays and ethnic minorities, who among us doesn't yearn for the harmonious, happy endings comedy supposedly delivers? The comic traditions we will encounter this season at Theater at Monmouth—commedia dell'arte, farce, songs, satire, comedy of manners, verbal banter, and burlesque—may give us a respite from the cruel mudslinging of the 24-hour news cycle, but they will hardly allow for a total escape from politics. Indeed, these comedies might be said to explore the politics of illusion, with love being the greatest illusion of all. Tony Kushner's magician has it right: theater is an illusion, and "the art of illusion is the art of love, and the art of love is the blood-red heart of the world." Staging laughter about the art of love is itself a political act in a nation filled with violence and hate. Bertolt Brecht once pointed out that "the theatre needs no justification other than entertainment," but he also insisted that entertainment can enlighten and improve the world: "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."



*Cyrano and his love interest, Roxanne*

noblemen" and defeats the relentless mockery of his inferiors. Cyrano's nose is hardly the only ugly thing one will find in Roets' adaptation of Rostand's classic. As Steve Martin, who played the role of Cyrano in the film *Roxanne*, once said, "Comedy is not pretty." It is the rakish Count and his beloved Rosina that get our attention in *The Barber of Seville*, but in the second play of Beaumarchais' trilogy the political potential of the eponymous character is more apparent: "Nobility fortune, rank, position! How proud they make a man feel! What have you done to deserve such advantages? Put yourself to the trouble of being born—nothing more!" Figaro's speech on the undeserving aristocracy has been called "the first shot in the [French] revolution that would explode five years later." Due to the widening gap between the rich and poor in the United States, Figaro's

This season's opening play, *Cyrano*, is about a man with a huge nose and an even bigger heart, a man who questions the authority of "false

speech often resonates with audiences today. Even a fairy tale that amuses children, Perrault's *Puss in Boots*, says something similar about aristocratic superiority: it is a fraud, a theatrical illusion. Indeed, in Dawn McAndrews' delightful retelling, we see right through the illusions that prop up the greedy nobility. Like most fairy tales, McAndrews' *Boots* offers plenty of political allegory, not to mention interspecies affection. We need to be able to laugh at marriage, love, the family, and all the illusions those bonds generate. Tyrannical fathers stand out this season, but in the end there is plenty of blame to go around. No matter how much trouble it brings, these comedies' quarreling couples and dysfunctional families cannot do without what Shakespeare's plays describe as the "folly" of love.

So why "Vive La France!?" There is plenty of French history to be learned: the famous Battle of Agincourt during the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) in *Henry V*, the Thirty Years' War (1618 to 1648) in *Cyrano*, the lead up to the French Revolution in *The Barber of Seville*, and the reign of Henri de Navarre, otherwise known as Henry IV of France, from 1589 to 1610 alluded to in *Love's Labour's Lost*. "Vive La France" can be heard in many contexts, but its nationalistic meaning is most associated with Bastille Day, when we commemorate the beginning of the Revolution in 1789. Of course, TAM's motto this year does not refer to a cultural essence or national history one can glean from the plays. Instead, the power of "Vive La France!" lies in the energy created by its verb and imperative form, the way the motto urges us to seek out the words that will enact social change and make us feel more "alive" in so many different ways: through love, camaraderie, and hope (and let's not forget "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité"). If I had to pick one character from this season who most embodies the energy of "Vive La France!"



*King Henry mourns the boy*

it would be Cyrano, with his lust for life, his zeal for performance, and his relentless and tragicomic pursuit of the object of his desire.

This season TAM also transports us back to a more recent revolution even Beaumarchais could not have predicted:

the Sexual Revolution of England in the 1960s. Although the erotic feast of words in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* can be daunting for readers, when brought to life in productions like this one, a play that is, as director McAndrews puts it, "literally and figuratively stuffed with words" becomes a pleasure to digest. In our media-saturated age of instant gratification and short attention spans, anything that is long runs the danger of falling into neglect. So what about a play that has Shakespeare's longest scene, longest speech, and longest word? Well, what's not to like about the word honorificabilitudinitatibus (the state of being able to achieve honors)? The humor and pleasure of this word, and the entire play, will stick with you all summer and beyond. Moreover, in this contemporary, English setting, "Vive La France!" takes on new meaning: in addition to their political history and beautiful language, the French are famous for their love of food, wine, and romance. Shakespeare's comedy centers on what happens when four young men try to repress their desire for these things. England's recent vote to leave the European Union notwithstanding, this play shows that the English cannot be deprived of the erotic charms of French culture. Who better than Shakespeare to show that "Vive La France!" has a universal appeal?

The outlier this season is Shakespeare's *Henry V*, yet even this history play contains some of the comedy's central features, namely a marriage and a "happy ending" (at least for the English). This is certainly the most political play of the season, and the nationalist fervor of "Brexit" gives it even more contemporary relevance than ever: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers" took on a new meaning after June 23, 2016. Henry V raises doubts about the motives and mendacity of a King who slaughters French prisoners of war and sends his own troops into harm's way. "If the cause be not good," one of Henry's soldiers says, "The King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make." The French bride Katherine, war booty for the victorious English King, may have the last word: "Les langues des hommes sont pleines de tromperies" (the words of men are full of deceit). Perhaps Harry's adventures in France can be blamed on his Machiavellian father, a man who usurped the throne: "Therefore, my Harry," he advised the Prince in *Henry IV, Part Two*, "Be it thy course to busy giddy minds/With foreign quarrels." In a more comic vein, Kushner's *The Illusion* satirizes another clueless and cruel father's attempt to reconcile with his wayward son: Pridamant whips, banishes, fears, and, worst of all, can't understand or appreciate his son or the life he leads. Kushner's play and theater in general teach us that we will never peel away all the masks and disguises, the illusions that make up the "self" and the world. It also teaches us that even if

we remain, to put it in psychoanalytic terms, strangers to ourselves, theater, literature and the arts can help us learn a little more about the world and our place within it, perhaps enough to salvage some joy and justice amid so much violence, pain and oppression.

The Theater at Monmouth season coincides with the arrival of summer, not spring, but in Maine the winter chill lingers into June, making early summer feel like spring, the season of Shakespearean comedy. The desire for vitality and renewal is definitely something we feel in June and July in Maine, so the lines about the return of spring by Rosina in *The Barber of Seville* will resonate: "When spring returns again/Cupid resumes his reign/All life pervading,/All things invading,/Flowers and lovers' hearts/Spring new warmth imparts." In Kushner's *The Illusion*, a play that parodies comic conventions, Melibea says to Calisto, "It isn't cold, it's spring, and warm, and I know who you are, Calisto," and Calisto responds with "I sprout green leaves atop my head/And blossom purple buds of desire for you." Yet in all the plays this year there are obstacles, as is traditional in comedy, to the union of lovers and/or happiness—an ignorant father (*The Illusion*), a cruel guardian (*Barber*), a nose (*Cyrano*), a King's death (*Love's Labour's*), and Ogres (*Boots*). Love doesn't come easy in comedy, and marriage and harmony are hardly "natural," despite their associations with the renewal of spring. As summer gives way to fall, we'll know that it is not enough to sit back passively and hope for the best. We have much to learn from *Cyrano*, a sentimental, comic hero: he knows how fragile and elusive social justice, love, and happiness can be, and yet he has the courage and resilience to pursue them whatever the cost.

We should also appreciate the fact that comedy does allow us to maintain some distance, critical or otherwise, from this mortal coil. Although the etymology is incorrect, it is tempting to trace the word comedy back to the Greek "Koma," or deep sleep, for the theater is, as Shakespeare's Prospero (who is echoed by Kushner's Alcandre) reminds us, "such stuff as dreams are made on." The word "comedy" is actually derived from the Greek "komoidia," which itself comes from "Komos" or "revel, carousal, merry-making, festival," and "aoidos," or "singer, poet." Thus comedy might be thought of as a "song of merry-making" that a community needs in order to thrive or even simply survive. Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost* brings out this traditional aspect of comedy more than any other play, but on the whole this is a very festive, comic season at TAM, and that may be just what we need in 2016.