Professor David Peimer | Molière: The Great French Writer of Comedies and Satires

– Okay, so hi everybody. And Lauren, once again, thanks so much for your help in the week and today and hope everybody is well. So going to dive into this remarkable French writer for me and many people, I imagine, Molière, and just some ideas about his life. And then to dive into a couple of his plays in particular, I mean, he wrote over 30, so we'll just focus on a few. And I want to link it to some aspects of his life and the era that he was living in. Obviously, as everybody knows, we are following France, going way back to Roman times, Gaul, et cetera, and now we've moved certainly in the artistic sphere or cultural sphere. We are moving into the early writers, Molière being amongst the earliest. And in terms of the French, and I think it's accurate to say, regarded as their greatest playwright of all, often regarded as their equivalent of Shakespeare or Goethe, whatever. And it's fascinating to me that Molière is really seen as that by French people and is so deeply entrenched in French culture, but it's coming from satire and comedy. And I'm going to stress the word satire, not only the farces and comedies that he wrote as well, because of course satire always has a political or a more cutting social edge than just comedy or farce. And I think, you know, quite a lot of his greatest works were viciously satirical and I want to try and tease out during today what makes him such a great writer, what makes him such a great satirist, and how does his comedy work and link it to some of the ancient Greek comedy, some of the Italian commedia dell'arte, and how he has influenced comedy writing and satire writing ever since his life, not only in France, but certainly in the western world.

This is an image here of Molière on the right hand side of your screen, and then on the left, this is a painting from the early 1800s of an image as if it's Molière sitting down and having tea or something, eating whatever, with Louis XIV in blue. So I wanted to show, because he is so tied up with the 14 years that he spent really writing for Louis, or shall we say Louis and the aristocracy, and the nobility and the elite of France in that way. And how Louis protected him as a writer is so important in terms of this guy's life. And you know, where he came from, the origins and what happened and so on, and why and how I think Louis took him under his wing as it were and really protected him from prison, from the attacks by creditors, vicious attacks by the Catholic church, and not only verbal, you know. Bannings, imprisonments, all sorts of things that the King Louis XIV, the Sun King, the great, you know, Sun King of the last of French history, really, you know. One thinks of Charlemagne one thinks of Louis XIV, and then perhaps others after that. So he's living at the time of Louis XIV in Versailles. Those are his dates, you know, born 1622, died 1673. So he is living just after Shakespeare dies. So Shakespeare is in England living in the late 1600s. Sorry, the late 1500s into the early 1600s. Shakespeare dies and then Molière in a

sense comes just a bit after. Whether he ever read or knew, we are not absolutely sure or translated, whatever, or any link between the two. We don't know. I can't say for sure. What we can say for sure is the link between French popular performance of the streets and the travelling players, which I'm going to show during today, and the Italian very physical commedia dell'arte, which comes from the ancient Roman and ancient Greek theatre tradition. I think he's more allied with the European theatrical, certainly France, Italy theatrical tradition. And I'm going to show a couple of clips from a remarkable film made about Molière's life by a fantastic French director. She's theatre and film, her name is Ariane Mnouchkine, and she's one of the greats of the last 30, 40 years as a French director and creator of new work, let's say, in theatre and in film and adaptive of other people's works, et cetera. She's incredibly high status and profile in France and Europe generally.

So I'm going to show a few clips from the film, which give an idea of the life that he lived and, you know, talk about some of his major plays and trying to tease out what is so remarkable and the beginnings of a modernism for me in European satire and farce and comedy post, you know, post ancient Greeks, ancient Romans, et cetera.

So Molière's living in this era, and he is a playwright. And what's important, similar to Shakespeare, and many of of the others of this period, is that he's an actor. So he knows stage business, he knows other actors. He's working with other actors all the time. You know, he's engaged fully with the craft and the business, the commercial and the business of making theatre and making a living out of it out of a very tough choice of lifestyle. He writes comedies, he writes farces, he writes short essays, satires, all sorts. And he's performed more often than any other playwright in France. Born into a relatively prosperous family for the era that he's living in, as I said. And then he spent 13 years working as an actor and 14 years under Louis' patronage in particular. But what happens before is that he gains the patronage of the aristocrats of France, 'cause of course it's divine right of kings, it's absolute monarchy, it's absolute rule of kings in this period that we're talking about. It's feudalism, of course, but absolute divine right of kings who have total absolute power. And so patronage is crucial. Italy, it might be Medici family, Shakespeare has to get it from the court, the royal court if he can, which he does in England and others, you know, one has to have patronage of, if not the king or the queen, certainly the nobility. And you know, it's become known in theatre for circles as, you know, one needs one's Medici in the Medici family in a way as a bit of a, it's became known in theatre language. Okay, so he had the patronage of a very important aristocrat who was the Duke of Orléans, and he was the brother of Louis XIV. And that is a crucial connection for Molière. That enables him to get a performance before the king. And everything hinges on the one performance before the king because, you know, his brother Philip, who's the Duke of Orléans, liking it, great, but not quite the same as

the king. And he performs this interesting play, which is not known as one of his greats, but I've directed and studied it. It's fantastic. It's called A Doctor in Love. It's quite a simple play but it's got all the elements of Molière's comedy and what I like about his work so much also, even though it's 500 years old, it feels so modern. It's got such a quick shift in mood and tempo, such a quick shift of scenes and characters coming and going. There's no time to get bored, there's no time to dwell on anything. You know, the characters don't ruminate endlessly. It's comedy. He gets on with a story. Gets on with a plot and the character's journey, and this is really a whole big change in writing. It does go back to Aristophanes of ancient Greece two and a half thousand years ago but he's bringing it into a modern era. And Louis XIV said to him, okay, fine, you can have a performance in the theatre very adjacent to the Louvre. And later he was given the theatre in the Palais-Royal. And Louis likes the performance. It's basically a satire on the pomposity of doctors of the time using Latin, using academic and scientific and medical jargon of the time in order to impress everybody else in the play. And it starts to speak of Molière's great theme, which is utter hypocrisy of individuals and society and how to turn into comedy and satire and how he sees. And it's not only that he is mocking and teasing, you know, sort of the professional classes, doctors, lawyers, politicians and others, even the clergy, which I'll come later, I'll come talk about more. But that he is going deeper, you know, he is regarded by one of the other writers of his times as an enemy of hypocrisy, which for his times is a strong statement to use if you're going to not have your head chopped off as a writer. Basically the play, you know, is a fairly simple but very witty, funny play about that. You know, it's constantly snakes and ladders, characters going up a bit, pumping themselves up, I'm more important, I have social status, I'm educated, I'm knowledgeable, I know more than this one and that one, and therefore I'm more important or I've made more money, or I'm a better doctor, or I've read more Latin, or I know my Roman history, or I'm a military leader, and I'm great and I'm wonderful. And then the play is all about playing with that pomposity and that hypocrisy because the end, you know, the humanity of the individual is shown to be either manipulative or human or combinations of both. So it's the sheer hypocrisy of status and society and the demands that society puts on individuals to pump oneselves up. And I think that speaks as powerfully then as it does today. I mean, celebrity culture. What else is celebrity culture if not, I'm a celebrity, I'm important, you know? I wrote a song and I sang a pop song or a musical theatre or any song. I wrote a poem or I made 10 million bucks or I owned, you know, I've set up five restaurants, or I did this or that, or, you know, I won prizes, which is all wonderful and great, but when the attitude is pompous and arrogance, not only pride, combined with achievement, it starts to reek of hypocrisy, especially if it's founded on something which ain't really there. And Molière is always looking for the con. And this is something that David Mamet writes about enormously, you know, the con artist, and I'm going to link it to Mamet later. And how

you do the con by showing that you're greater, better, more important than many others and we all do that. And Molière is viciously attacking that, I think. And the reason I wanted to show this picture at the beginning is because, look at the costumes. Look at these people and their hair, their costumes, their hats, their food. You can imagine the paintings, I'm sure many, many, everybody here, well many of us have been to the Palace of Versailles and others around Europe. I mean, they're extraordinary. And this is just a performance of pompousness. It's a performance of self importance of everybody in the painting that this French painter of the early 19th Century has done. You know, Molière in black and Louis XIV, the Sun King, in blue. So the mere costumes and the setting of the painting, I think suggests exactly what Molière is trying to write about. He wrote plays called, The Affected Ladies, The School for Husbands, The School for Wives. You know, all about how wives can learn to be husbands, and husbands can learn to be with wives, The Affected Ladies, it's all about the affectation of characters and how they affect self importance, more important than, you know, anybody else around. And it's that affectation that he satirises and pulls down to earth. By getting the royal favour from Louis, very importantly, he gets a royal pension for himself and his troop of actors. And in these days you can imagine how it just hits the top of the tree. So he himself takes himself very, those great self importance and pomposity as well. You know, the picture on the right meant to show him a little bit more human, but he was a caught between the two. And he continued and Louis made him the official author of court entertainments, author slash part organiser of some of the court entertainments for a period.

Show the next slide, please, Lauren. Okay, thanks. So this here is a picture of Molière, I mean, dressed in a costume obviously for one of his plays. But on the right is the first English translation in the early 1700s of Molière's works. So we see the English perception of Molière in the drawing on the left. And this is the first translation. So he is recognised and seen pretty early on as really important writer and playwright by the English because he's translated and staged and so on. And I think in the last 100 years or so, there's been a strange sort of coming close and distancing between Molière and England in a way at a remarkable appreciation of his work and literary endeavours and achievements, but not quite the same sense of humour. It's seen as a bit more French or European as opposed to the English perhaps. In many ways one can speculate. Okay, if we can go onto the next slide, please. This is just a picture of Molière. I've tried to choose a couple of them because it's interesting that there are not many of Molière dressed in sort of royal regalia as we see in that other painting with Louis and all the nobles. Yeah, I don't think it's any other statement other than he knows his place. He's not a noble, he's not an aristocrat. He's there by the grace of the king alone and anything could happen. The king will change his mind in a second and he'll be toast. So he can't quite dress and before show himself in daily life as anything near approaching the aristocratic class or the

nobles. And we see him dressed more in, I wouldn't say ordinary clothing, but, you know, lower noble at bottom of the rung. Snakes and ladders, basically. Okay. One of his great plays is Tartuffe, which is one of the great plays I'm sure many of you have heard of, and is done again and again everywhere in the world. And in essence, it is a vicious attack when we read it today but through comedy and satire on the Catholic Church in France. Huge and it's not a light attack. And the Catholic Church denounced him because obviously they saw, what is he doing? He is putting a pot, you know, the Catholic Church hypocrisy and it was banned for five years. He was thrown into prison. Creditors, other all sorts of horrible things. But Louis keeps coming. The king, Louis XIV, keeps coming to help him out, basically save his skin. Louis doesn't make a big thing of it against the Church 'cause he can't, obviously, but he saves him as a writer and brings him back under his patronage for the court. It might be a political manoeuvre that Louis wants to keep the threat, the Catholic Church in its place, so he can use a comic playwright just to remind the Catholic Church, you know, you're not above me, I'm ultimately still the divine king. Even though you've got a link to God, I've got a closer link to God because God has appointed me king. All these things have been speculated at by scholars, you know, how these people actually lived, and their little shenanigans or political shenanigans. Then he wrote the play Don Juan afterwards, which had to be withdrawn for other reason and never re-staged. Endless problems with the Catholic Church, endless problems with the law as well, which is quite different to some of the English playwrights of their period as before. Shakespeare, Marlowe, Johnson and others, who are very smart in the way that they don't let themselves be harassed or worse, imprisoned, by the law or the religion or anything linked to real power. You know, they're able to make their theatre all the time and obviously commercial, whereas Molière is skating that fine line all the time, you know, and suffers for it partly. One of his great plays, for me, is called The Imaginary Invalid. I mean, he writes plays all about, you know, school for warehouse wives are trained, or husbands are, our people need to learn social etiquette and social customs, which are shown to be ridiculous, absurd, hypocritical in his plays. It's the social nuance, the cultural mores, which are shown to be just as fickle as the weather. As fickle as fashion can change from season to season. And The Imaginary Invalid, you know, character imagines he's an invalid, but actually isn't. The doctor, in spite of himself, imagines he's a great doctor, but isn't. So it's how all people imagine themselves in professions or positions in society but they're actually nowhere near as big or great or knowledgeable as they put out in the social image of themselves. And that's the heart of the hypocrisy and the fun and the wit in the comedy in the plays. In 1673, during the final production of his play, it's called, The Imaginary Invalid. He suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis and he had a coughing fit on stage and a haemorrhage while playing the hypochondriac character in the play called The Imaginary Invalid. Talk about ridiculous satire on satire and absurd upon absurd. He finishes the

performance somehow, collapsed afterwards, and died a few hours later, while he's playing a fictitious hypochondriac on the stage. Going back to his life. His mother dies when he's 10. He grows up with his father and his father had the post which was called The Keeper of the King's Carpets and Upholstery. So his father had a link. Tenuous, workman in a way, but a little bit more, with royalty and aristocracy. And he tried to bring Molière, tried to bring his son in so that he would follow him and to have the same post but Molière says, no, I want to be an actor, I want to write, I want to do all these things, travel France, be a travelling actor, and he does. Father's not pleased. Molière's theatre troupe went bankrupt a number of times. Different to the English ones as well that we all know. The famous ones of similar period. Goes bankrupt, creditors, prison, et cetera. Large debts up and down. Then when he died, actors were so frowned upon in France at the time in Europe that they were not allowed to be buried in the so-called more religious or the sacred parts of the cemetery. He was only allowed to be buried where the unbaptized orphans were buried in the cemetery. And I mentioned that not to be very dramatic, but to show the society's perception of actor writers at the time. You know, Mozart, the pauper's grave, whatever. And then afterwards, even though he's been a writer and a performer for the king. And of course, you know, later it comes this glorification of the guy and his life. I mean, what's important is that Molière, he moves away from the influence of the Italian and the Italian influence is the strongest. Commedia dell'arte in essence is a very physical comedy. It's stock characters, what we call stock characters. You have the village idiot, you have the lord of the manor or the duke or the king. You have the princess, you have the damsel in distress. You may have the prostitute, you may have the pauper. You may have the thief or the beggar, let's say. So they're all stereotype characters. And commedia dell'arte, coming from the ancient tradition, through Greece and Rome and Italy, is a physical comedy of stock characters like these ones I've mentioned, archetypes. And the acting is very physical and it's so exaggerated in a physical way, exaggerated for our times. For their times, not. it's a bit I guess like early Punch and Judy puppets. You know, it's such immediate emotion. I love you, hug, kiss, I hate you, I don't like you, punch, kick. It's very Punch and Judy style in the physical acting. And that's, in a way, commedia dell'arte. The other thing crucial is that coming from the ancient Greeks and ancient Romans, satire is often a master slave relationship where the slave is often shown to be the clever one who outwits the master but doesn't have the social power or decision making power to do anything because he or she here is a slave and he can't make a decision to do something against the master's wishes but is far cleverer and has to find manipulative, clever ways to guide the master out of his stupidity, to act something, you know, vaguely intelligent. So, and the comedy lies in the slave being the upstart, the clever, the outwitter who manipulates the master to do what he wants in order so both of them can progress in some way and maybe the slave will get some advantages, some payback, some privileges. You know, food, wealth, money, wine,

woman, song, whatever in return. So it's that relationship of the master slave is inverted as to who the clever one is. And although the slave doesn't have agency and decision making power has to influence the master and outwit and manipulate. Well, that's such a common theme in today as well. And it's not necessarily master slave in today's theatre or film, but you know, it's the buddy buddy where one is supposedly the naive or the bit stupid or whatever, or the lower class, or the lower social status finds ways to outwit, you know, the boss, the leader, the king, the ruler, the prime minister, the president, just because they're not as stupid or full of folly. So that dynamic, which goes way back two and a half thousand years, it comes also through commedia dell'arte. And then into contemporary times it's the idea of the ordinary small guy, the Woody Allen, the Charlie Chaplain, the Groucho Marx, all the small guys, how they have to use their brains and their wit to outwit the bigger guys who have the real power or the real political power or social status or decision making power, or business leaders, political leaders, whatever. So it's the small guy outwitting the big one or the character in authority, let's say. And that structure goes all the way through the ones I've mentioned. You know, we see it in Billy Wilder, we see it in Charlie Chaplin, in so many of the ones I mentioned. And I want to argue, I want to suggest even in Monty Python, with John Cleese in Fawlty Towers, you know, he's trying to pump himself up all the time, be much more important than he is. You know, I run the little hotel by the seaside, you know, I'm important, I'm Fawlty, I'm Basil, I know, you know, et cetera. He's constantly outwitted by the other characters. And in a way, Basil Fawlty for me combines both. You know, because he is the sidekick to his wife, but he's also trying to pump himself up and it's so linked to a lot of Molière's. That character idea is linked to a lot of Molière's characters where, as I say, they keep pumping their self-images of importance, brought down by other characters, but then have others who are always above them as well.

Okay, I think I see it in that's commedia dell'arte. And Molière takes it, he absorbs it completely from commedia dell'arte, the Italian style, and he turns it into an attack on hypocrisy. I think he takes it a step further than just this comic play of who outwits who, you know, the slave, the servant outwits the madam or the master. Classic, but when it's also shown in the social context of societal hypocrisy, then it's a whole different level of satire and fun and political attack. And I think that's what he achieves. And that's for me the greatness of Molière and how he outlasts so many of the other writers, because hypocrisy is as human and as ancient as humans ourselves. And I think that's where he took this physical comedy and these ideas, these themes, these characters, stock character types, so much further. And enable, it goes way back to Aristophanes. I mentioned Greece, but it begins the rise for our times maybe of Oscar Wilde, Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two small characters in Hamlet. They're just two ordinary little friends who are nothing,

really. They're just messenger boys, really, you know? And Stoppard brilliantly takes them out and makes them, the little guys, the big guys of the whole play. It's the Molière impulse where I'm not saying it's conscious in Stoppard or that Stoppard would viciously agree or disagree with me. I'm just saying it's there in that trajectory, Oscar Wilde, the same, the hypocrisy of the English upper class of the times that Oscar Wilde is writing, but he does it with such wit and charm and humour that everybody laughs and loves it. But look deeper and it's not only about outwitting and cleverness and brilliant witty lines and so on in witty situations, it's about the sheer hypocrisy of human nature and society. And that means that everybody's living a double life. Everybody has a social image and everybody has a truthful inner image. And that shows the utter absurdity of human need to live a double life, what we project in public and who we really are in private. And I think that's what Oscar Wilde, you know, an enemy of hypocrisy to go back to that phrase written about Molière centuries ago. And I think Wilde does it. And that is linked to this idea of affectation, whether it be accent, whether it be choice of syllable, of word, whether it be ways of looking, of physical deportment, ways of standing, sitting, holding your teacup with your finger, you know, holding your biscuit to whatever, you know, putting the sugar and so on. All of these mannerisms and affectations which denoted certain finesse, a certain achievement of class or social status, is shown up to be ridiculous and absurd. Ultimately he sees the absurd and folly in human nature and the society, which we're all part of, me as much as anybody else. We're all part of it. He even mocked The Académie Française, which was a group created by Richelieu. Taking on Richelieu and what Richelieu has created? I mean, that's pretty big stuff. You know, he's doing it, Molière. Because Richelieu and others had set up rules for French theatre, what was allowed, what wasn't. And he writes about, well, I'm going to take it on, I'm going to satirise it, mock it. Not so easy for his own times. And so it's a savage attack on the social customs, even of theater-making of his own times, through humour. And I think when you do it through humour, you achieve an enormous amount. And let's never forget it's always the satirists the dictators or vicious leaders or threatened leaders always ban first. It's the comedy writers, the satirists, that always get it in the neck first.

Another play of his is called, The Imaginary Cuckold. He has The Imaginary Invalid, The Imaginary Cuckold. So it's all about how people imagine themselves to be more than they are. The theme of marital relationship is so much in his plays. His own marriage was very up and down, on and off, the lying, the cheating, the falsity of the public image and the reality of what goes on behind closed doors. The school for Wives is poking fun at the limited education that was given to the daughters of the aristocratic or the rich families. You know, certain, all these things you can imagine, affectation, comportment, et cetera. Tartuffe, which is one of the, as I said, one of the great plays of his, is performed at Versailles for the first time in 1664 and this

created the greatest scandal of Molière's career and has become regarded as the greatest play of his life. And it depicts a hypocrisy not only of the dominant classes, but the Catholic Church. An outrage, scandal, attack, ban, as I said, for five years. What happens is that a man arrives who pretends to be very religious, pretends to be pious and all the laws of religion and understanding of the Catholic religion and going to come to help educate the family, especially the wife of the nobleman, of the head of the family and all of this. But the real thing is that he's nothing like that. The real thing is a complete conman who just wants to seduce the wife and, if possible, get rid of the husband, not kill, but get rid of the husband and marry the wife, get all the money, but at least seduce, con them all. It's the conman. And as David Mamet writes brilliantly about the conman, because so many of his play's characters are all about how we con in contemporary culture in America and the West, everywhere. And Mamet talks about the art of the conman is to convince the other person to have confidence in him or her. The art of the con is to convince others to have confidence in me, the conman. So you will have confidence in me. That's Mamet's understanding and I think it's brilliant, which he does in so many of his plays. And I'm going to push it here, but I'm sure he's read Molière, and you know, we see this idea of the conman, the con artist, not only the Trumps of the world, but but so many, you know, how we con in life, whether it's affectation, social status, the things I'm talking about, or just, you know, in ordinary life with other people, at work, wherever. And we constantly play the con, which means make others feel confident in us. And it's all in Molière. And I think Molière brilliantly creates this in his characters 'cause the others believe it. So in Tartuffe he convinces everybody that he is here to dispense piety, to teach and to show the real meaning of the church, religion and Christianity and Catholicism, et cetera. Meanwhile, every step of the way he's out to con the lot and seduce and sleep with the wife of the nobleman. And the whole thing is built around that. And you can imagine how the Catholic Church got pretty upset. Let's not forget the BBC refused to show, pulled the money as EMI on the Life of Brian, Monty Python. And that movie was only ever made because George Harrison stepped in with literally a couple of days to go and sent the millions across to the Monty Python group so they could do the play. So they could do the movie without even having read the script. If it hadn't been for George Harrison, the Life of Brian would never have been made. So even in our own times in democracies, we see how scared people are of taking on any religious institution. But what's interesting is Molière, and clever, he never took on the monarchy. So he never, and you know, even Shakespeare, I spoke about Henry V last, couple hundred years before Shakespeare lived, but it's shown in a way which never attacks the institution of monarchy. Maybe certain individuals are corrupt or evil or villains, but the institution is never touched, but praised, which you have to for these writers. Otherwise, you know, their neck is literally on the line. So for Molière, he never shows an attack on the religious, sorry, on the aristocracy. And in Miloš

Forman's movie, Amadeus, Mozart is cleverly shown to never attack the institution of the monarchy. Many others, marriage or many other things and so on. So, you know, the king and the nobles can enjoy. Mozart can carry on composing, Molière can carry on writing. So Tartuffe became the huge, the most influential of all these plays, if you like, because I think it combines all these elements I'm talking about. The conman, affectation, the social customs, the hypocrisy, the inversion of who has the decision making power, who doesn't, who's really the slave to who, et cetera. It's all played with in the art of the con to me. So it's how pompous individuals impress others, try to impress. He often attacks physicians, I'm sorry to say, to every physician watching, you know, because at the time, as we all know, you put those things on to bleed people and that was sort of, you know, cure or whatever it was. And he shows that to be ridiculous on stage. Put a glass in a heated, bleed them, and that's going to cure? He shows it to be absolutely ridiculous. So he's got a sense of the ridiculous in the physician, the ridiculous in the lawyer, the ridiculous in the educated professor with Latin and all sorts of other things. They're ridiculous because it's used to impress, it's not used to cure, to teach, to help or real legal advice or other things. It's all done to impress and that's part of adaptation and pomposity. In 1672 you wrote a play called, The Learned Ladies, which was about the banning of legal use of music and theatre, which was banned at the time. So he's not scared to take on, you know, laws. He writes another play, Middle Class Gentleman. All these sorts of titles, you get the idea of what he's doing. In the 14 years that he was under the king's patronage, he performed 85 plays and wrote 31 of them. So it afforded him time, money, opportunity to write, which we have been the beneficiary of today. He also combined 'cause Louis said to him, well do something which combines the ballets that we have at Versailles and your theatre. So he would create something which combined court ballet, dance, what becomes known as dance theatre today, perhaps. And it's just by chance because Louis on a whim wants a couple of plays like that. So he develops this whole approach, which he writes about, I'm not going to go into detail now. Anyway, he makes Louis very happy and his highlight is that Louis XIV, the Sun King, even acts an Egyptian in one of Molière's plays. Then he knows he'd probably be okay for life long as he doesn't touch the institution of the monarchy. And as long as Louis stays alive, obviously. So conventional thinkers, religious leaders, medical professionals, legal professionals, scholars, professors, all of these are ridiculed and seen as absurd because they're trying to impress, prove, et cetera, all the time. And what this does, it touches on something fundamental in the enlightenment, which is, you know, perhaps very early days of enlightenment when he is writing because it shows an individualist way of thinking. And Molière is trying to push individualism like Shakespeare. Push individualism of thought over what the professor says, over what the lawyer, the religious leader, the conventional philosopher, the medical whoever, everybody's under the nobility, the king, all of them. Conventional thinking is up for grabs. Nothing is

sacred. It's all up for ridicule and not only attack but ridicule and shown to be ridiculous in these ways. Satire needs the ridiculous. It's not only about poking fun. And this is the spirit of individualism, whether he knows it through reading or intuited of the enlightenment to come, a sense of the individualism to come. And I think there's something quite profound in seeing, and I do think he's aware of it when you read the plays carefully. And that's why it's for me one of the greatest of all comic playwrights, of all writers, because that streak is ultimately underneath the ridicule and the absurd in the comedy.

Okay, could we show the next slide please, Lauren? I just want to show here, what we're going to show is a couple of clips of what would've been, this is from the movie of Molière, and what would've been the kind of popular entertainment of his times that he would've lived in.

(A video clip of the 1978 film "Molière" plays)

– [Narrator] Molière's passion is the theatre, but his career is in shambles, until an unlikely benefactor with an unusual request, provides him with an unbelievable opportunity. But of course, there's a catch. A tale of lust, love, and the comic adventures that would inspire a legend.

– Thank you. If you could show the next one, the next clip, please. And the next clip is just, I just want to show the first minute, really. Just an introduction from a piece that the BBC did a little a while ago.

(Video clip of a BBC special on Molière plays)

– When the French refer to their native tongue, they call it the language of Molière. Today we're celebrating four centuries of France's most illustrious playwright. One must eat to live and not live to eat.

– 400 Years.

– Okay, we can halt it here, please, Lauren.

Okay, I just wanted to show this because it's a long programme, don't want to go into it now, but it's just to show how he really is understood and perceived not in France, but outside as well and why, which I've tried to touch on today. And in the next clip he is ready to show something of, this is from the film about Molière, and just to show the first little bit, which it shows Molière as a kid in the streets of Paris, and looking at what would've probably been the kinds of popular forms of entertainment at the time to remind us of his origins, where Molière read comes from, the streets in Paris, and the kinds of knock about comedy Punch and Judy style of live actors for

comedy. If we can show it please, Lauren. Thanks.

(A video clip of the 1978 film "Molière" plays)

Okay, we can hold that clip please, and then if we can show the next clip. It's all from the same film. This showing the travelling players out on the road, France. And Molière has joined his troupe of travelling players. It is the leader for them, the writer, the director, the organiser, the businessman. And then thanks, Lauren. You can hold it there.

(A video clip of the 1978 film "Molière" plays)

Okay, so this shows you, you get street performance of all different kinds. You have what we'd call circus today, gymnastics, circus, street performers, so-called magicians, knockabout comedy, what we'd call today knockabout influenced by commedia dell'arte, you know, where characters can have a skull because of the way they use their body and they act Punch and Judy styles. That's again, a master servant thing being shown as in an upstart way to overturn that classic relationship. So all of these, just to show you the styles of performance, just a tiny hint of Molière's youth as a kid. And then what he moves to, that painting of him in the Versailles with Louis and writing scripts. Commedia dell'arte was also very improvisational, so he had the basic storyline and the actors all knew their basic storyline, but they would vary with the lines and would make up some and improvise and so on. And he puts it all down, you know, in script writing, taking one of the classic traditions of commedia dell'arte a step further into writing. So it's a sense of where he comes from and it's shown a little bit naively perhaps here or romantically with such, you know, joy, pleasure, fun, childlike, but it's meant to be through the child or youthful teenager Molière's eyes, this whole first part of the film. And I wanted to show because in a way it's part of the perception of many in France and perhaps globally as well, you know, of certain aspects of his youth. I mean, the critical part is we can say that, you know, you don't see the poverty of Paris, you don't see the poverty of this, of the rural areas. And also the costumes are so clean and tidy, the hair, everybody, all the guys are shaved, you know, which is a question mark in the film about attention to detail. But overall it gives a sense of where this guy's coming from in terms of the Molière of performance, the Molière of live performance of his times, and where he moves to when he goes into Palace of Versailles. I also think that, you know, there are writers like Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, Catch-22, you know, it absolutely would find themselves inside Molière completely. Catch-22 all the time he has characters who are rational and thought, you know, but then you see the catch. Of course it's not called catch. It's a similar idea to Catch-22. You know, where's the real absurdity, where's the real sanity, insanity, as we do in Catch-22, and many other contemporary novels and plays? And for me, he brings, he sort of

wrenches ancient Greek Aristophanes, the ancient Roman satirists and comedy writers the Italian ones from . He wrenches them into the modernist era, if you like, with these other ideas I'm saying. For Molière is that tragedy, he writes about this very interesting in a couple of essays where he talks about tragedy must be heroic because then you show the fall of the heroic character. Now that's different from being pompous and trying to impress and pretend you're something that you are not. Comedy must hold the mirror up to nature. Comedy is not heroic. Tragedy has to have a heroic character, a fall or a rise, usually a fall, and then a rise in terms of greatness or realisation at least is the classic character structure in tragedy. Comedy holds a mirror up to nature as we are. Trying to impress, trying to be pompous, hypocritical, who we really are inside, whether we admit it or not. Molière writes, "You can't achieve anything in comedy unless you show characters who come from living types." And he talks, he gives a whole long, lovely, funny essay, how do you make decent people laugh? "That's a strange business. The strange business of making people laugh." And then he goes on, to me, the most insightful comment of all, which I want to conclude with, where he writes in one of his essays called, The Comic and the Rational, that, "The comic must show the rational and the incongruity of rationalism, and you use rationalism to attack what is set up as rationally a social moral, if you like, a social value or formal behaviour. That incongruity is at the heart of the comic, of the clown or the harlequin or whatever the comic character is." I've mentioned a whole lot from Chaplin to Woody Allen to many, many others. It's the incongruity of life, the incongruity of the image set up and the reality of one's life. So many of his characters pretend to be something they are not. Pretend to be sick, but they're a hypochondriac. Pretend to be an invalid, but they're not. And they do it in order to con others in order to achieve something. And incongruity is at the heart of the comic. It follows that all the lying, this is Molière writing, "It follows that everybody lying and disguise and the cheating, all the outward show differs from the inner reality. And that's the essence of the comic." He goes on to write about the double vision of the wise and the foolish, the right and the wrong, must be seen side by side. The folly and the wisdom, mirror up to human nature, not the portrayal of the heroic. That's the tragic. And I think he gets it in the difference what we might call today between serious drama and satire or comedy drama. He understands, and when you think of Catch-22, when you think of Monty Python, we think of so many of the great classic comics of our times or our century, it's the incongruity of the social system versus who people really are, the incongruity of somebody performing as if they're something so important, but the reality of who they really are as well. And in our era of celebrity culture, I think the incongruity screams, if not rages inside our ears so powerfully where to be celebrity, media personality, you know, Warhol's 15 minutes of fame, anybody who has anything of a little bit of fame, a little bit of TV whatever. As Oscar Wilde said, the only thing worse than having a bad reputation is having no reputation. It's understanding celebrity

culture and how charisma and celebrity and leadership and political and all other ways happening in our cultures today and that utter incongruity and to mock it, to satirise and laugh at it. And I think that's what Molière points to, and for me, what makes him so incredibly contemporary. And Voltaire wrote a fantastic essay on Molière and he called him the Painter of France, because for him, Molière painted France, not only because he expanded the vocabulary like Shakespeare did so much but he could use the language of peasants, of the emerging mercantile class, the nobility, the upper class. He could play with the language of all. He could play with mannerisms, affectations, temptation. He could play with how hypocrisy really works. The beginning of the emergent individualist spirit of the enlightenment which attacks and questions the received knowledge of the professor, the lawyer, the philosopher, the doctor, the physician, whoever who all tell us what to believe, then it all changes in 10 or 20, 30 years time, you know, and so on. So it's that incongruity and I think when Voltaire talks about him as the Painter of France, I think Voltaire is meaning he paints an image of a mirror up to France, but he's also painting what's really going on inside all the mannerisms and everything of France. And if I may end with a little quote from Disraeli, which links very closely to what Molière wrote about the difference between vice and virtue is that Disraeli, what may be vice for one group may be seen as a virtue by others and vice versa. And Molière has a section in one of his essays where he writes exactly about that. And I think that understanding of that incongruity in human society that we set up is pretty profound and for me, very funny, profoundly funny, absurdly and powerful. This last image, thank you Lauren for this. This is one of the great statues of Molière in France. Okay, let's hold it there. Thank you everybody and we can do questions.

Q & A and Comments

– Susan, thank you. Gail. Hi, how are you? Hope you're well in Joburg. Yes, I have directed Molière. Thank you. And it's extraordinary how quick contemporary actors get it and can act it, can access it.

– Yolandi, The Misanthrope is an exception. It's a very serious sad play. Yeah, depending on how it's staged, Yolandi. I think it can be staged with much more of that sadness or melancholy or less as well. I've seen various versions.

– Hazel,

Q: Can you repeat the name of the film?

A: It's called Molière by the director and writer is Ariane Mnouchkine. She's the French director.

– Margaret,

Q: When you talk about European theatre and tradition which countries do you include beyond France and Italy?

A: Oh, great question, Margaret. I would include Spain, Portugal, parts of Germany, definitely some parts of Eastern Europe I think as well and I don't know enough about the Scandinavian countries, but I think I would include some of them in addition and even some of England because that tradition of the commedia dell'arte coming from ancient Greeks and the ancient Romans through the Italians spread everywhere in the whole of Europe.

– Arlene, Carousel is based on a Molière play. It's a great point and a great question, Arlene. I need to check that. Thank you. Which one it was based on.

– Sandy, the warrior outfit with the red bow in there. I know, exactly. Thank you. I mean, it's how the ridiculous is made to be quite profound, incongruous, and really understanding it.

– Mitzi, he was quite handsome. Yeah, well that's the actor. Oh, the actual pictures of him. Yes, he certainly was handsome and a lot of the women, there are all sorts of letters of him and other women and, you know, all sorts of fantastic. The school for the scandal stories, let's say.

– Myrna, Tartuffe, my absolute favourite. Not performed enough. Yeah, yeah, I agree. You know, players would show Molière and just go for the quick joke and the quick, the brilliant witty lines, I think miss the deeper sense in Molière as they would with, you know, maybe Groucho and many others.

– Nicholas, take my hair shirt and my discipline. Tartuffe, first words on stage. Total hypocrisy.

– Peter, I studied at school in 1947, The Imaginary Invalid. Never thought that he died while acting the role. I mean, it's true. He died while acting the role of the hypochondriac. The Imaginary Invalid, title says it all, you know?

– Okay, Maria,

Q: Is the relationship between La Perella and Don Giovanni the continuation of commedia dell'arte?

A: That is a great question, Maria. Whew. I think in essence it's part of it, yes. We need a whole lot more time to go into the nuances.

– Stan, he has a sensuous face and look very much so. Thank you. I

agree and I love these drawings, paintings of him because I think they really capture, you know, a lot of who he really was.

– Barbara, thank you. Of our double life, yep, all of us. We all mean very much everybody.

– David, reminds me of the TV show, Keeping Up the Appearances. Yes.

– Nicholas, you said he was buried in non-consecrated ground. He was reinterred. Yes, he was reentered much later taken on, but the original, he was only allowed to be buried with unbaptized orphan kids.

– Yolandi, I understand he was excommunicated 'cause of Tartuffe and hence could not be considered baptised and hence buried in the Catholic sect. Yeah, in a back section of the cemetery because of Tartuffe and the attack on the Catholic Church's hypocrisy.

– Myrna, talk about religious satire. The Favour, the Watch, and the Very Big Fish with Jeff Goldblum. Yeah. Okay. Absolutely, Myrna.

– Jan,

Q: Was Tartuffe written in rhyming couplets?

A: It's a great question. In the translation I have, I haven't seen it with rhyming couplets. It's a great question. I don't know about the original French. I need to check that. Okay. Some of the characters. That would be another whole, I mean he wrote over 30 plays so I can't go into, you know, I didn't want to go into the, it's a great question Jan, but I thought I'd hold back on the names of characters because otherwise I and we can maybe get a bit confused. Oh, caught up in it.

– Lorna, some maintain that Molière, Corneille, and Racine combined equal Shakespeare. Yeah, that's what some people have said, but Shakespeare doesn't make me chuckle like Molière does. He makes us laugh at our own, you know, our own hypocrisy, our own ways of being pompous, trying to impress, you know, all these things that we do aside from all the deeper meanings I'm mentioning. And he does go for the social satire. Absolutely. And that's where he's underestimated, Molière, you know. I mean I think it was de Gaulle, if I'm right, who said that France does not imprison its Voltaire. You know, it's thinker. And I think Voltaire would've said, well, Voltaire did say, well, he is the painter of France. You know, I don't think they can imprison the satirist.

– Maria, leeches to bleed patients. That's what it was. Leeches, thank you.

– Myrna,

Q: Aside from the aristocracy, did the common people see Molière?

A: Great question. If they could afford it, probably yes, because he performed in the Palace of Versailles once he was under Louis' patronage and also in a theatre next to the Louvre, but before that he would've done his plays in the travelling player. Like the very last clip I showed. There's another other clips from the film where they show the actors trying to learn the lines of his scripts and he hands out the pages, you know, what Shakespeare would've done, handed out the pages, there's only one copy, you know? Here's your five pages, here's your three. Learn them, learn them, you know, because there was just one copy of the original of these plays when they were first performed. So he would've had, he shows in the movie handing out the pages, they're got to learn them and they're to remember the lines. They forget and, you know, it's all chaotic. So did the common people see? Yes, because until they all got financed by Louis, they were part of this travelling player group.

– Herbert, there was a controversy when Molière married someone 20 years younger. Yep. That he married his daughter. Yeah, I don't think there's a truth to that, that it was his daughter. I think that's, let's put it this way. There's no hard evidence of it at all and he was pretty well known because he was linked to the court of Louis. So, you know, they would've done, they would've checked him out, pretty much.

– Rita, Google's an excellent resource for questions. Yeah, well the god of Google, you know? Who's Molière? Who's, you know, is it Google or us? Great, great, Rita.

– Marion,

Q: What were the names of the films?

A: That was all from the one film by Ariane Mnouchkine. The title is simply Molière. She did another brilliant one around on the French Revolution, just called 1789. And she directed fantastic plays in French, in France, in Paris. Marion, thank you.

– Romaine,

Q: What was his relationship with subtlety?

A: That's a great question, Romaine. I think, you know, do we see subtlety in Catch-22, in Groucho, in Woody Allen, in others? I guess there are subtleties at times, but I don't think overall the style is subtle because this kind of comedy needs a lot of physicality and what we call today exaggeration in acting. You know, it's very, I mean, academic jargon would call it heightened, but I think it's very, yeah,

it's exaggerated physically and exaggerated acting for the comic effect. I'm not sure about the subtlety, although never to underestimate subtle moments of glances, looks, just a quick word, a quick phrase. And of course timing is all about subtlety to me in comedy.

– Myrna, in the back of one scene was a character calling today. Yeah, I'm sure.

– Rosemary, did Molière. It's a great point, you know, about the Satanic verse.

– Rosemary,

Q: Did Molière and Shakespeare use some kind of shorthand to write their scripts after improvisations?

A: It's a great question, which I actually did try to find out. I can't find hard evidence because they had to give the scripts to the actors to learn and the actors wouldn't have much time quickly learn and, you know, get up on stage. So unless they knew them very well, I doubt they used shorthand.

– Marion, the play Tartuffe is available on YouTube. You'll watch it. Have fun is what I can say.

– Gary, thanks. Title of the film we mentioned.

Q: Where would Molière have gotten his education of classic literature?

A: Great question. Because he's at this period in, let's say, really the middle of the 1600s, and because his father, he's the Keeper of the Carpets and Upholstery in the palace of the king, through his father, I think he would've had access to education, literature, and reading. I think if I remember his father wanted him to go to university and study. He did, I think a bit. He said he read and understood. You know, but mostly, like Shakespeare, self-taught.

– Sandra, another expose of hypocrisy is Tom Wolfe. Yes, The Bonfire of the Vanities. Great.

– William,

Q: When and how did mime become performing art?

A: That's a great question. I think it began in ancient Africa with ancient storytellers and I think in ancient Greece and elsewhere before the introduction of character and dialogue and singing and dancing. I think mime probably went way back and it might have just

been mimicking an animal or mimicking somebody else. I'm not saying it's the what we would think of today as though maybe, you know, the art of miming, but in a rough way, the acting out of, physical miming of something else, copying I think goes way back. Storytelling, ways of telling stories.

– Margaret, thanks for that. Yeah, okay. O levels in the '50s, I find it quite boring. I hope you, okay, now you're inspired. Okay, great. You know, no excuses. Find a great contemporary translation 'cause there are a lot of really good translations which are contemporary and fun or, yeah, movie.

– Rita, ah, thanks for that audio book. Thanks for that link. Rita, thank you for your kind, kind comment.

– Sandra, what I really enjoy about this plays translated in English is how the translators retain the rhyming couplets in a lot of the plays.

– Barbara,

Q: Was the Russian theatrical tradition influenced by Molière?

A: That is a great question. For me, the greatest satirist in Russia was Gogol. Especially the play of his, The Inspector General, which is very similar to a Molière=type play. It's an imposter who pretends to be an inspector general of a small town, goes there and terrifies the mayor and the counsellors, the doctors, the lawyers, even scholars and everybody, as if he's the real thing sent by the king from Moscow and is really conning the con job to get as much money out of them and duck as quickly as possible with his sidekick, his servant. But they're basically two out of work failed actors and crooks, small time crooks. And they pretend to be the inspector general. It's all about pretending to be something they're not. And that's Molière. Absolutely.

– Debbie,

Q: Did you know where we can find these films?

A: I think we mentioned.

– David, clearly Molière must have trodden carefully when it came to Louis XIV. I think he certainly did. That's why I say he could mock the social mores and the attitudes, the affectations, all of that stuff like Oscar Wilde. He could mock it all and satirise it, but not the institution of monarchy and the institution of feudalism and nobility itself. And that's where, to go back to your question on subtlety, that's a subtle and crucial difference between what he does with the Catholic Church and scholars and medical and all sorts of

other, you know, professional or business people.

Q: How dirty can you make characters before you lose credibility?

A: That's a great question. That would be of an amazing talk on its own.

– Averel, I read The Imaginary Invalid at the University of Toronto in '58. Ah, great.

– Jillian, Wikipedia and Wikipedia. I have to compete with Wikipedia. Jillian says Carousel was based on Ferenc Molnár's 1909 play. Thank you. Robin, thank you for your kind comment.

– Ross, Molière reminds you of one man, two governors. Yep. No Carousel, Romaine, Molière, great.

– Anne,

Q: Is it is the basis of commedia dell'arte rather than Aristophanes?

A: I think yes. Commedia dell'arte takes from the ancient Romans, Platus, Terrence, and the other ancient Roman comedy writers. But they themselves take from Aristophanes and some of the ancient Greeks and they develop it into this improvisational, very physical, often the inversion of master slave stuff, themes into that kind of wit. They develop it into that form of acting. For the Greeks it would've been with masks, of course, and with the ancient Romans with and without masks.

– Marion, Tartuffe was written alexandrine. Thank you. Margaret, just checked a copy of Tartuffe. Great. Some of it's in rhyming couplets, yep. And depending on the translation, better or worse. Doreen, Stratford Ontario formed a brilliant The Miser. Oh great.

– Susan, it's great to know the king. That's for sure and he got there through his first patron being the king's brother.

– Judy,

Q: Is the rumour that Molière didn't write his own plays?

A: Nope. It's totally his own, his own handwriting. Own plays and all the actors. There is just far too much evidence. Totally.

– Sue,

Q: Did you say Miloš Forman made the movie?

A: No, Miloš Forman did Amadeus, which for me was absolutely

brilliant, on Mozart. And it was just that Mozart is clever as well. Did not attack the institution of monarchy. Miloš Forman made Amadeus and Ariane Mnouchkine made Molière.

– Myrna, Inspector General, yep. That's the one. Judy, and if not, why not?

– Yolandi, 1789 is available from the Toronto Library. If you want a brilliant film, which is about the theatricalization of the French Revolution, it's the same director, Ariane Mnouchkine who made that film, which is called 1789. It's set in a theatre, theatre actors acting out the great characters, Robespierre, Marat, and many of the others of the French Revolution, Danton, and so on. It's the same director. Aronovich, it says. One man, two govs, yep. Susan, thank you. Herbert, Gogol's short story, The Nose. That's it, it's very Molière-like. Spot on, highly recommended. Funny. It was made into an opera by Shostakovich, Yes. The Nose was made into an opera by Shostakovich. Great.

– Okay, thank you very much everybody, and thank you Lauren again and hope everyone has a great rest of the weekend.