Scapin
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

Insights is published by the Utah Shakespeare Festival, 351 West Center Street; Cedar City, UT 84720. Bruce C. Lee, communications director and editor; Phil Hermansen, art director.

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Cover photo: David Ivers (left) as Scapin and Michael Santo as Geronte in the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2012 production of Scapin.
Scapin

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Synopsis: Scapin

The crafty Scapin, servant to the household of Geronte, jumps into the story as he first promises to help in the affairs of his neighbor’s son, Octave, then to aid in those of his own charge, Leander (Geronte’s son). Both young men have fallen in love with unlikely, and penniless, beauties, and both need money to help solve their dilemmas.

Scapin knows a good ruse will always win the day and he drafts Sylvestre, Octave’s servant, into his schemes. Convincing Sylvestre he’s a wonderful actor (and allowing him to build characterizations using movie cliches), Scapin has him play characters who will deceive the family patriarchs into parting with large sums of money.

The final scene of the first act is a vaudevile/music hall version of Molière’s famous scene in which Scapin spins a tale of kidnapping, foreigners, and ransom. Once the money is obtained, however, Scapin pushes further in order to exact a little revenge on those he’s served. Thinking Geronte has said something nasty about him, Scapin sets out to teach him a lesson. The roguish words, however, are Scapin’s own lies and stories finally coming back to him; his revenge backfires and he must flee.

In the end however, Scapin’s schemes aid in revealing the penniless beauties to be the exact right mates for the young charges—being of high birth after all since they are discovered to be the missing children of both patriarchs—and Scapin returns to his post, with the pleasant punishment of having to marry the maidservant of one of the daughters. There is a final chase and dance among all the participants, which, inevitably, becomes the raucous, delightful curtain call.

Characters: Scapin

Octave: son of Argante and lover of Hyacinth
Silvestre: servant to Octave
Scapin: servant to Leander
Hyacinth: daughter of Geronte and lover of Octave
Argante: father of Octave
Geronte: father of Leander
Leander: son of Geronte and lover of Zerbinette
Zerbinette: beloved of Leander
Nerine: a woman servant
George: at the keyboard
Messengers/Porters/Gendarmes
Even Elmo loves Scapin
By Ryan D. Paul

What do the loveable Muppet Elmo, a cross-dressing actor, and Molière have in common? The answer, of course, is the Utah Shakespeare Festival. This summer the Festival will produce a very popular and very funny production of Scapin. The play, an adaptation of Molière's 325-year-old farce Les Fourberies de Scapin, follows the adventures of a crafty servant as he tries to fulfill his duties. It comes as no surprise that the laugh-out-loud humor contained in this production comes from the minds of two of today’s most brilliant and gifted writers, Bill Irwin and Mark O’Donnell.

Those who have young children, or have never grown up themselves, may recognize Bill Irwin as the much loved character Mr. Noodle from Sesame Street. Irwin received a degree in Theatre Arts from Oberlin College and more importantly graduated from the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Clown College. Much of Irwin’s work is defined by his expressive body movements and non-verbal performances. Do yourself a favor and check out some of his work on YouTube. He is a popular face on television and in film. He has appeared on Northern Exposure, The Cosby Show, Law and Order, and CSI. His film credits include, among others, Eight Men Out, How the Grinch Stole Christmas, Popeye, A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream, and most recently, Rachel Getting Married.

Aside from originating the role of Scapin in this adaptation, Irwin has distinguished himself on stage. In 1988 he performed with Steve Martin and Robin Williams in Waiting for Godot as Lucky who’s only speaking part in the play is a 500 word monologue. He has appeared in Bye Bye Birdie and has directed, for the stage, a popular production of A Flea in Her Ear, which the Utah Shakespeare Festival produced in 1994. In 2005 he won the Tony Award for Best Actor in a Play for his appearance as George in the revival of Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Mark O’Donnell, the co-adapter of Scapin, has written novels, plays, poetry, and short stories. He attended Harvard where he wrote for the Harvard Lampoon. He also served as the writer and librettist for three Hasty Pudding musicals for the Hasty Pudding Theatricals group. His humor columns have appeared in The New Yorker, The New York Times, and The Atlantic, among others.

In 2003 O’Donnell, along with co-writer Thomas Meehan, won the Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical for their work on Hairspray. In 2008, the writing duo received another Tony nomination for their work on another John Waters musical Cry-Baby. Although not as well-known as Irwin, O’Donnell has been well-received by the critics. In a 2009 interview with author Hugh Macleod, O’Donnell reflects: “I joke that I’m obscure in many fields, but I am proud that I’ve published poetry, cartoons, plays, novels, essays and songs, even if I’m not well known as any one of those things. The diversity has been fulfilling. That Knopf and The New Yorker and Playwrights Horizons, the best in their respective areas, have sponsored me—I am exultant.”

One thing is for certain, with the words of Irwin and O’Donnell, the comedic talents of David Ivers, and the creative team the Utah Shakespeare Festival has assembled, Scapin will prove to be the most riotous play the Randall L. Jones Theatre has seen in years. You will shed tears of laughter so bring your handkerchiefs, but please leave your Muppets at home.
Tragedy Tomorrow, Commedia Tonight!

By Lawrence Henley

In exchange for your trust, please let me assert that one of the most legendary dramatists, a man who produced some of the most sophisticated comedy ever written, modeled some of his work on a popular European form of street comedy. Please ask: “why would Moliére, superior playwright that he was, lower himself to such an ordinary approach to a play? Wouldn’t that be a bit like violinist Itzhak Perlman performing hip-hop with Jay-Zee? Well, yes, but to seek out a better answer, let’s look at one of Moliére’s late works, Les Fourberies de Scapin.

Perhaps second in stature only to Will Shakespeare as a writer of seventeenth century comedy, Moliére is still the reigning master of French comedic literature for the stage. During his quarter-century as a dramatist and actor, Moliére elevated French comedy to rival his English counterparts by employing his unique own commentative style, ruthlessly lampooning the faults, foibles, and gross moral hypocrisy he found in French society. Primarily critical of the upper classes and the pomposity of religious leaders, Moliére focused a spotlight on their human weaknesses with a laser focus that more often than once got him into trouble with Parisian authorities.

In his best known works, Tartuffe (1664), The School for Wives (1662), The Misanthrope (1666), and The Imaginary Invalid (1673), Moliére transformed the raw, less refined comedy he experienced as a youth into a higher form of the art. Infusing his plays with a stratospheric level of characterization and thought, he penned them using sophisticated language missing from much of the comic work that preceded him.

Born nearly four centuries ago (in 1622), Moliére’s birth name was Jean Baptiste Poquelin. The son of the court upholsterer working for, most notably, his highness King Louis XIV, Moliére’s father fully expected that his son would succeed him in business. Like most gifted artists, a life in the upholstery trade seemed humdrum and held no appeal for Moliére. As a boy, he had often accompanied his maternal grandfather to see the performing troupes of the commedia dell’arte, much to the disapproval of his father. Through these experiences, he developed a fondness for the theatre, eventually choosing it to be his life’s work.

Despite the refinements evident in Moliére’s classic string of plays, the primary foundation of his art was rooted in the improvised histrionics of the commedia dell’arte. Toward the end of his career, his health steadily failing, Moliére paid a final tribute to his beloved commedia in his 1671 work Les Fourberies de Scapin (literally “Scapin’s deceipts”). The commedia had been extremely influential to his formation as a writer and an actor, and he loved its outrageous situational humor. He also held much admiration for the fearlessness of the commedia’s actors in parading the silliness of the human condition, without regard to subject or stature.

Descending from the early comedy of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as the Atellan farce, the vagabond performers of the commedia blanketed Western Europe from the middle Renaissance all the way through the eighteenth century. Based on a progressively large catalogue of stock characters developed in various Italian, French and Spanish cities, its basic form was mounted on a framework of everyday scenarios, romantic trysts, and tricky situations concerning the exchange of money or property. Not altogether different than today’s situation or sketch comedy, the commedia was also highly improvised within the planned structure and theme of each individual performance. The actors continually employed standard bits of humor and “shtick” perfected over decades of practice called the “lazzi.” These funny bits became highly familiar to audiences, and could be inserted into a scene impromptu by a cast member. The other actors would immediately tune into such changes in the direction of the scene, playing it forward.
In drawing a comparison with the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2012 production of Scapin, an observer would be very close to the target in pointing out an ancestral connection between the vintage commedia d'ell'arte, early twentieth century British music hall comedy and American vaudeville, as well as with television sketch comedy. The spirit and influence of the commedia is also highly evident in the zany antics of acts of England's wacky Benny Hill and Monty Python and those of our own Marx Brothers.

The characters of the commedia were easily identifiable to their audiences through the generic masks and trademark costumes each of them wore. Traipsing all about Europe, troupes of commedia performers usually performed their never-the-same-twice plays on crude, temporary stages found at carnivals and fairs, and in public streets. Although these mini-masterpieces were intended mostly for everyday folk, the commedia eventually gained popularity with the French court nobility. As a result, plots from the Italian and Spanish commedia players were admired and adapted by French writers such as Molière.

Several characters found in Les Fourberies de Scapin bear strong resemblance to standard (“stock”) commedia traits of personality. Much like Shakespeare's A Comedy of Errors, Molière has doubled the primary roles (two fathers, two sons, two love interests, and two servants). In both “Les Fourberies” and Scapin, a resemblance to Pantalone (a miserly old goat of a character) can be seen in the fathers, Argonte and Geronte. Not one, but two sets of “inamorati” (young lovers) are featured in the play.

Of course, the marquee role in the play is the wily and witty Scapin, servant to Leander, a young lover. Scapin's counterpart in servitude, Sylvestre, is servant to another young lover, Octave. Sylvestre is bumbling, nervous and less quick-witted. Scapin's character is modeled on the “zanni,” a group of quick-witted and conniving servant characters that use their position as advisors and interlopers to create comic business and fix life's messes born of their masters. Other famous zanni characters were Arlecchino (commonly anglicized as “Harlequin”), Brighela, and Pulcinella. Il Dottore (The Doctor) and other popular Commedia characters, such as the buffoonish soldier Miles Gloriosus (Il Capitano) are not to be found in Scapin.

Numerous translations and adaptations of Les Fourberies de Scapin have been produced in the United States, most notably Scapino! Penned by Jim Dale and Frank Dunlop, Scapino! was a minor Broadway hit during the 1970s. This year, for its summer indoor comedy, the Utah Shakespeare Festival has selected Bill Irwin and Mark O'Donnell's uproariously funny 1995 version, simply entitled Scapin. A hit with regional audiences for over fifteen years, Scapin was originally produced at the Seattle Repertory Theatre. Subsequently, it earned outstanding notices at New York's Roundabout Theatre in 1997. Recently revived with acclaim at San Francisco's American Repertory Theatre, the Utah Shakespeare Festival has now engaged one of America's best, Kent Thompson (the Denver Center Theatre Company), to direct its own production.

This production will delight lovers of clowning. Mr. Thompson envisions a gala production similar in style to the Bill Irwin production, where Irwin played the title role. Possibly the last great theatre clown, the Tony Award-winner is a former member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe and a clown college graduate. Irwin is well-known for his trademark baggy pants, straw hat, cane, floppy clown shoes, and comic pantomime. Famous for dishing out sight gags reminiscent of the vaudeville era, Thompson calls Irwin “a theatrical Charlie Chaplin.” In the Festival production, Irwin's role will be performed superbly by Festival Artistic Director David Ivers.

The Festival will adorn Scapin's set with vaudevillian era bulb footlighting and a calliope circus organ (performed by George, an added character). Two exaggerated mansions will represent the families of Geronte and Argante, fathers to Leander and Octave. The latter characters are lovestruck
“inamorata,” who have fallen in love with Zerbinette and Hyacinth, a pair of saucy girls that, on face inspection will never meet the fathers’ approval. If the situation isn’t corrected, the result will be the disinheriting of both sons. Enter Scapin to rescue the day to the delight of all!

Festival audiences, make ready for a wild evening of Molière meets commedia meets the Ringling Brothers. Before heading out to a performance of Scapin, please leave all of the serious bones in your body at home, or in your hotel room. Tragedy tomorrow — commedia tonight!