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'Scapin': A Comic Genius in a Moliere Revival

By BEN BRANTLEY

NEW YORK -- Does anybody know what planet Bill Irwin really comes from? As he vividly demonstrates in his inspired new production of Moliere's "Scapin," which opened Thursday night at the Laura Pels Theater, this prince of clowns bears a distinctly nonearthly relationship to the basic laws of motion and anatomy.

His very walk, a ballet of graceful awkwardness, suggests someone used to moving in another element; even his stationary posture, usually at an improbable angle to the floor beneath him, bespeaks a strained relationship with the forces of gravity.

His limbs appear to be filled with some uncategorized liquid that can freeze and thaw and refreeze in a matter of seconds. And his preternaturally smooth face is both glazed-seeming and absurdly elastic.

Actually, Irwin comes from a long line of aliens who have spun art out of their adversarial relationships with the exasperating planet on which they've found themselves. He is a love child of Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Marcel Marceau and Danny Kaye, among others, comic geniuses who have kept renewing and refining a tradition of physical humor as ageless as laughter.

This "Scapin," directed by Irwin for the Roundabout Theater Company from his felicitous adaptation with Mark O'Donnell, would probably have gone over big with the same audience who first saw Moliere's "Fourberies de Scapin" (literally, "Deceits of Scapin") in Paris in 1671.

Yet there are no archival cobwebs on this production; nor, thank goodness, is there much in the way of the postmodern quotation marks with which classics are often framed for contemporary consumption. The science of physics that Irwin practices is as fresh and as applicable as that of Isaac Newton.

There are two faces to the type of clownmanship in which Irwin specializes: There is the beleaguered, passive type, for whom life is a losing wrestling match, who can't open a door without its hitting him in the face; and there is his scheming, aggressive counterpart, who makes the rest of his world march (or crawl) to his rhythms.

When last seen in New York, in the delicious Broadway mime show "Fool Moon," Irwin was mostly in the passive mode, while his partner in that production, David Shiner, took on the more confrontational duties. In "Scapin," however, Irwin is very

much the feisty catalyst, and the fit is just as comfortable.

Indeed, the director of this production happens to be playing a part, a sly servant based on a type perfected for the commedia dell'arte who becomes the all-arranging director of his own world of hapless lovers and pompous employers.

Much of the joy of watching this "Scapin" is seeing its title character shape the action to reflect his own deliriously logical, self-centered world view.

Early in the first act, Irwin calls out to Scapin's invaluable onstage keyboard accompanist, Bruce Hurlbut, "The schemer's boogie, please." It's an invitation to his fellow servant, Silvestre (Christopher Evan Welch, in a sensational New York debut), to join in a plot against their tyrannical masters.

It is also an invitation to dance. And the initially reluctant Welch is soon matching Irwin step for rubber-limbed step.

The scene is a blueprint for the entire show. This seduction process will be repeated, with variations, again and again, until by the evening's end every character is dancing the Scapin shuffle. Revenge, as it turns out, is sweet for everyone, even its victims.

"Les Fourberies de Scapin" was written late in Moliere's career, only two years before his death. Coming after such accomplished, complex comic studies in hypocrisy as "Tartuffe," this elemental, coincidence-driven farce, in which Scapin smooths the course of true love for a quartet of silly young things while avenging himself on a pair of stingy merchants, seemed a throwback to the playwright's earlier, greener days. (His contemporary, the critic and poet Boileau, lamented that it simply wasn't worthy of the author of "The Misanthrope.")

Yet "Scapin" has had remarkable staying power on stages throughout the world. (It was first adapted in English by Thomas Otway in 1677.)

New York has seen two memorable productions of it in the last two decades: the ebullient English import starring Jim Dale in the mid-1970s and Andrei Belgrader and Shelly Berc's production for the Classic Stage Company three years ago, with Stanley Tucci (of the film "Big Night") in the title role. (A variation on the same classical plot can be found in the recently revived "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.")

Irwin, although unquestionably the star here, is less of a grandstander than Dale, who worked the audience like a suave but demented imp playing Vegas. The seduction Irwin achieves isn't so much a matter of brazen energy and charisma (he seems least comfortable, in fact, in directly addressing the audience) as one of crafty calculation.

Precise physical details, as in the way Scapin clutches his baggy trousers, become central to the plot and a means of defining what drives this scam. (The fact that those trousers fit by the play's end is even more of a triumph than Scapin's beating up the curmudgeonly Geronte, played by Gerry Vichi.)

Irwin also uses the play as a format for initiating his audience into the joys of his particular brand of theater. The production's high points are, appropriately, the scenes in which Scapin teaches his put-upon pal Sylvestre how to be an actor. "Do you have a theater arts background?" Irwin asks Welch, as a prelude to convincing Sylvestre to impersonate a cutthroat foreigner.

And as Welch's none-too-bright character grows jubilantly into his make-believe persona, in a bravura blend of James Cagney and Robert DeNiro at their most homicidal, the audience goes happily over the top with him. It's a vicarious lesson in the fine art of comic madness.

The production self-consciously calls attention to the play's creakier devices. Signs labeled "Exposition" and "What an Amazing Coincidence" spring into place like supertitles at the appropriate moments.

But Irwin and O'Donnell's script stays close to the tone and structure of its source, even as it makes ingenious use of the license for interpolation that commedia dell'arte traditionally allows.

It has some engagingly dotty translations from the original French. ("Better wed than dead," says Scapin at one point.)

And it slyly works in barbed references to contemporary xenophobia, colorblind casting, the perception of lawyers fostered by the O.J. Simpson trials and even the institution that is producing "Scapin." (There's a wicked allusion to the meagerness of Roundabout salaries, and when Scapin disguises himself, it's in a red Chanel-style suit, frosted wig and prim eyeglasses; he is, he explains, a Roundabout subscriber.)

Not all of the performers are on Irwin's and Welch's level, although Vichi's Catskills-style skinflint, Kristin Chenoweth's sob-prone ingenue and Mary Bond Davis' authoritatively centered servant woman, who knows just how to handle Scapin, are delightful.

And by the time the entire ensemble is dragged into a spectacular Keystone chase-cum-dance, they have all become prize graduates of the Bill Irwin school of comic physics.

Every aspect of the production reflects and enriches the Irwin perspective, including Victoria Petrovich's Renaissance clown costumes, Nancy Schertler's quicksilver lighting and Hurlbut's jaunty, silent movie-style music, which becomes a character in itself.

Above all, there is Douglas Stein's wonderful courtyard set, which evokes the Italian pen-and-ink studies in linear perspective of the 1400s. It gives off an almost academic sense of calm and proportion. It's the perfect backdrop, in other words, for a production in which the entire world is Irwin's straight man.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

Scapin. By Moliere; adapted by Bill Irwin and Mark O'Donnell; directed by Irwin. Sets by Douglas Stein; costumes by Victoria Petrovich; lighting by Nancy Schertler; sound by Tom Morse; composer-arranger, Bruce Hurlbut; collaborator-

production stage manager, Nancy Harrington. Presented by the Roundabout Theater Company, Todd Haimes, artistic director. At the Criterion Center, Laura Pels Theater, 1530 Broadway, New York.

With: Bill Irwin (Scapin), Christopher Evan Welch (Sylvestre), Kristin Chenoweth (Hyacinth), Count Stovall (Argante), Gerry Vichi (Geronte), Mary Bond Davis (Nerine) and Bruce Hurlbut (at the keyboard).



Christopher Evan Welch and Bill Irwin in SCAPIN

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