

# ENTERTAINMENT

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## A French classic, 'Born Again'

Molière's 'Tartuffe' gets a screwball, Southern twist in an outdoor production.

**CHARLES McNULTY**  
THEATER CRITIC

I'll confess that it took me a moment to realize that "Tartuffe: Born Again," one of the offerings in Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum's 2024 repertory season, is actually quite an entertaining production.

Nature is my excuse. The

bucolic beauty of this beloved outdoor amphitheater in Topanga distracted me from the agreeable, lighthearted update of Molière's classic. But comedy and setting eventually come into balance.

Freyda Thomas' adaptation, relocating the play to 1980s Baton Rouge, maintains a relaxed American spirit. The rhymed verse the characters speak in doesn't at all hinder them from expressing themselves colloquially, in idioms that sound better with a languorous Southern lilt.

[See 'Tartuffe,' E6]



IAN FLANDERS

DAVID DeSANTOS, left, as Tartuffe with Michelle Jasso's Elmire at Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum.

# Tartuffery goes South in zany adaptation

["Tartuffe," from E1]

Molière's "Tartuffe" concerns the fallout in a family after an aging patriarch falls under the spell of a religious con artist. Orgon, a wealthy bourgeois who has taken a much younger second wife, signs over his soul to Tartuffe, a lecherous swindler who poses as a saint while pursuing a diabolical agenda.

For all his holy protestations, Tartuffe is clearly a crook. He is also hell-bent on making Orgon a cuckold. The fascinating question of the play is why Orgon refuses to see what is glaringly obvious to everyone else in his household.

Celebrated as a satire of religious hypocrisy, "Tartuffe" takes Orgon's tyrannical piety to farcical extremes. The humor of the situation is giddily exploited, but it's the subtle understanding of Orgon's unconscious motivations that gives the comedy a sneaky depth.

Molière didn't need



IAN FLANDERS

LYNN ROBERT BERG, left, plays wealthy Orgon, who signs over his soul to David DeSantos' Tartuffe.

Freud to tell him that sex is at the root of nearly all madness. The suggestion is that Orgon's sudden zealotry is linked to masculine insecurity. The character seems to be punishing his family for still being young and vibrant while he grows old and less formidable.

A shadow of mortality falls over the high jinks, draining our laughter of some of its ridicule. This

compassionate note is evident in "Tartuffe: Born Again," even if Melora Marshall's production is more screwball than psychological.

The staging leans into the silliness. The production opens with a musical prelude that draws campy inspiration from such 1980s icons as Olivia Newton-John and Richard Simmons.

The costumes by Vicki

covers he can make a bigger buck as a televangelist.

The cartoonish attire doesn't always suit the storytelling. It's hard, for instance, to accept the wise counsel of Cléante (Jonathan Blandino), Elmire's levelheaded brother, when he's outfitted like John Travolta on a disco dance floor. And I'm not sure why Maryann (Isabel Stallings), the daughter Orgon is prepared to sacrifice to Tartuffe's marriage bed, is dressed for what looks like a "Hee Haw" audition.

The desire to get a rise sometimes comes at the expense of dramatic sense. But Theatricum Botanicum takes a populist, whatever-floats-your-boat approach to the classics. Forget about academic reverence. With trees swaying in the gentle breeze and birds and butterflies gamboling in the setting sun, it would be foolish not to fall into sportive line.

But the production succeeds through the effectiveness of the central cast members. Tanya Alexander as Dorine, the sharp-tongued maid who works to thwart Tartuffe's takeover, is pivotal to the farce's smooth running. She drives the action with her sarcastic humor and quick-witted interventions. Jasso, a game presence from start to finish, never lets Elmire's outraged common sense dampen her affectionate nature or bold resourcefulness. In top villainous ham mode, DeSantos struts and preens around the stage like a Las Vegas nightclub virtuoso eager to line up his next gig. Berg's Orgon has the ticking-time-bomb look of a man in the grip of a belated midlife crisis. His barely repressed anger effectively lights the farce's fuse.

"Tartuffe: Born Again" might not satisfy purists, but anyone looking for a frolicsome encounter with a classic comedy in the most divine natural setting will leave with a smile.

### 'Tartuffe: Born Again'

**Where:** Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga

**When:** Check theater website for schedule. Ends Oct. 13

**Tickets:** \$30-\$60

**Info:** (310) 455-3723 or [theatricum.com](http://theatricum.com)

**Running time:** 2 hours, 15 minutes

Conrad set up a world that's part "Saturday Night Fever," part Jane Fonda aerobics video. As the farce gains speed, Orgon (Lynn Robert Berg) dons a pink suit that looks like it might be radioactive. Elmire (Michelle Jasso), Orgon's younger wife, is dressed for a Pedro Almodóvar-style nervous breakdown. Tartuffe (David DeSantos) comes off as an Elvis impersonator who dis-