A COMPANION GUIDE TO PLAY AND PRODUCTION
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The Play in 100 Words

In 17th century Paris, a law school dropout from the country is cursed with a strange affliction; Dorante is unable to tell the truth. After connecting with a servant with the opposite affliction, this charming but inconstant young man falls in love with Lucrece, whom he thinks is her friend Clarice. The real Clarice is engaged to his good friend Alcippe, but Dorante’s father hopes to see her married to his son. Misunderstandings entangle and untangle in this ageless romp, leaving no one out of the confusion.
Definitions

**Iambic Pentameter:** Spoken or written verse containing lines with 10 syllables apiece

**Rhyming Couplet:** Two lines of verse with rhymed endings

**Poitiers:** A town in the west of France. This is Dorante’s hometown (or is it?)

**Teutonic:** Relating to the particular religious and military order, or relating to the German branch of Indo-European language

**Pulchritude:** Beauty

**Baldachin:** First a cloth canopy, and later stonework over a throne or altar

**Postprandial:** Of the time after a meal

**Soubrette:** An actress or performer who plays a provocative, flirtatious role

**Lubricity:** Of the measure of lubrication/friction between things

**Lassitude:** Lack of energy

**Fabulation:** Lying

**Fictifying:** Lying

**Mendacity:** Lying

**Arriviste:** A self-serving social climber, namely one who has achieved success

**Charybdis:** A whirlpool from Greek Mythology. When ships would avoid Charybdis, the 6-headed monster Scylla would destroy them and drag them under.

**Gamine:** An attractive girl with a boyish charm.
Seventeenth century France gave rise to some of the greatest dramatists and tragedians in the history of the esteemed French language. France was becoming a colonial giant after a centuries-long monarchical tradition. As the 1600s began, the country had emerged from a religious civil war and had a new leader in Louis XIII (after he exiled his own mother Marie De Medici). The country was growing rich, and as Louis took control of the country, he sought (among many other things) to reverse the trend of French artists leaving the country (primarily for Italy), and to invigorate French artistry. He worked under the ministry of Cardinal Richelieu, whose dedication to reorganizing the royal court and making France a cultural capital of the world changed art, writing, and Western society forever.

Pierre Corneille was but four years old when Louis XIII was crowned king; he grew up in this burgeoning France and was working as a magistrate when he wrote his first play. It was a great success in Rouen in 1629 and, subsequently, in Paris. From there, the play found more productions and Corneille found an exuberant, well-educated Paris asking for more. Over the next five years he wrote plays produced to great reception in Paris before he was targeted by arguably the greatest tastemaker and culture-shaper of the time: Cardinal Richelieu. Richelieu started what we might refer to today as a “Supergroup” with himself as the central muse and source of direction. Les Cinq Auteurs brought together five of the country’s most celebrated writers to help Richelieu see his vision for French culture become a reality. Among them was Corneille, who didn’t find this arrangement conducive to his creativity. He felt bound by the insistence of Richelieu upon certain alterations to his work and adherence to virtues he saw fit; after splitting from this group and Richelieu, Corneille wrote what many consider his greatest play, Le Cid. Tragicomic, and
later produced and perceived as classically tragic, *Le Cid* flew in the face of the dramatic unities, and ruffled the feathers of the intelligentsia who held power at the time. It was banned from performances in Paris by Cardinal Richelieu after a harsh judgment issued by the Académie Française, but this play and plays of this period would set in motion the movement of Classical French Tragedy for decades to come.

After several years having written nothing, Corneille produced a few more proper tragedies and then moved into another chapter of his career as a writer. In 1643 he wrote *Le Menteur* (*The Liar*), a raucous comedy based on a Spanish story by Juan Ruiz De Alarcon. Much of Corneille’s tragic work was inspired by real or mythologized events. *Le Menteur* was a twist on his adaptive process but not a divergence entirely. Though not a story of a great historical figure or a hero, *The Liar* is a play handed down to us through several traditions, and one through which the nature of humanity continues to ring true.

Three-hundred and fifty years later in Chicago, IL, a writer was born that would take a somewhat opposite career path but ascend to similar fame. Like Corneille, Ives was well educated in established schools of repute; Ives attended Northwestern University and the Yale School of Drama. However, unlike Corneille, his first piece to garner the attention of the masses in a cultural center (New York City in his case) was a boisterous night of comedic one-acts. Perhaps his best-known work, *All in the Timing*, ran Off-Broadway in the early 1990s for over 600 performances, and is performed around the globe to this day. Since gaining renown with *All in the Timing*, Ives has taken after Corneille in his pattern of writing plays adapted from earlier works or other stories. Playing on the content of an 1870 Austrian novel, *Venus in Fur* played on Broadway in 2010 and was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play. Other retellings of stories include *New Jerusalem*, based on the story of Dutch-Jewish philosopher Baruch de Spinoza, *The School For Lies* (based on a Moliere play, *The Misanthrope*), and *A Flea in Her Ear* (from a 1907 French play). Ives’ work spans from the darkly tragic to the lightest of romps; from the starkest prose to the silliest verse. In *The Liar*, which Ives has stated is a “translaptation” (translation+adaptation), he maintains the humanity of a story told and retold in different languages and to different cultures of people. As you consider the performance of *The Liar*, consider the universality of lies, mistruths, and misunderstandings; folly, absurdity, and misinformation seem to never go out of style. How do you think the story has changed since it was first told? Is it possible to keep any story the same over the course of time and history?
An interview with Director Geoffrey Kent

Decorated Director, Actor, Fight Choreographer, and Arvada Center regular Geoffrey Kent has lent his directorial expertise to this knee-slapping adaptation. Consider the many adaptations this story has undergone, and all the directors, actors, and artists that have brought it to life. The following interview is a firsthand look into the vision of the director for this play, production, and how it fits into today’s world.

How does it feel to be returning to the repertory almost two years after the 2020 season was cut short by COVID-19?

The pandemic was brutal for freelance artists like myself and most of the performers I know. I am delighted we assembled a full season and created an opportunity for more collaboration and storytelling at the Arvada Center. Working on Small Mouth Sounds (on our second pass) I was affected by not only the need to create stories to share but the need our audience had to receive them. Talkbacks were confessions of what theatre means and, “When will you make more?” I am honored to be back in the director chair.

This play is written almost entirely in rhymed couplets. How does this inform your approach as a director?

There is a danger with any play that rhymes that it could devolve into a really long Dr. Seuss manifesto. This play has a high word count and a ton of contemporary references and humor. I discovered during callbacks that part of the comedy of the rhyme is pace, keeping the text zippy and frothy and letting the language deliver some of the humor for us. Then you don’t have to lean into the rhyme; you can just skip the text like a pebble until the next groin kick.

Have you worked on any 17th Century French plays before? Corneille? Moliere? Racine? What about this period of dramatic literature resonates with us today?

Corneille is fairly new to me, but I can’t escape nightmares of my junior year in high school as Harpagon in The Miser (Moliere). We had a special effects makeup expert that used latex and tissue to create these incredible wrinkles and age for the first dress rehearsal. After that I was on my own and my teen
thumbs devolved it into Freddy Krueger in France. I’m pretty sure one of my cheeks completely fell off in the first scene. *(Geoff smiled a wild smile).*

French farce, notably Corneille, is rife with lovers and liars, mistaken identity, misdelivered notes, the occasional invisible swashbuckle, and more. I think *The Liar* is a wonderful antidote to stress and encourages us to put our energy into chasing what is most important for all of us—love. Also groin kicks.

**Have you worked on any David Ives plays before? Which? What about his work resonates with you?**

I’m certainly a fan of *All in the Timing*, which is essentially intellectual sketch comedy though I am not certain I will ever understand “Philip Glass Buys a Loaf of Bread.” I have also worked on *The Liar* as a choreographer for the Denver Center for the Performing Arts Theatre Company and the Utah Shakespeare Festival. Both productions were wildly different and equally hilarious, so I have high hopes our team will develop our own sense of humor for our Arvada version.

**Dorante tells us in the play that “Lying is so simple.” Do you agree?**

Yes. But the repercussions are often going to make the cost of that lie outweigh the short-term benefit.

**In a world of fake news, deep-fakes, “alternative facts”, and ever-conflicting narratives, what does a play about a compulsive liar in love tell us about our own nature and how we might navigate this crazy world?**

Ultimately, with no spoilers intended, I think we will find all of our protagonists ultimately get what they want by finding the truth in themselves. A damn fine message for anyone in today’s world. Also, the preponderance of lies in this play are often inflated by the whole-hearted belief in them and a desire to pass them along. In our play that will lead to… well, groin kicks. But in real life that game of telephone with a lie can be disastrous. This story definitely has a lesson in the importance of truth and fact-checking and questioning one’s own bias. We may do it in rhyming couplets with a smile, but there is a lesson to be had amongst the laughter—my favorite way to learn and I hope for our audience too.
Verse, Pentameter, and Embellishment

In the actors’ and production teams’ copies of this play, David Ives gives some advice that will help any reader, listener, or audience member enjoy this vivacious play.

*This play is written in verse, and the verse is rhymed in iambic pentameter. Don’t let that scare you.*

In a world driven by and beholden to constant connectivity, efficiency in communication is king. We can send information across the globe with the wiggling of our fingers on our screens. This incredible power often causes us to compromise the artfulness of our language; sacrificing form for function, interpretation for transaction, color for black and white. In this play, we revisit a tradition that bucks this habit and dives deep into an age-old tradition of adorning spoken and written language alike in rhyming verse. In particular, Ives employs iambic pentameter in the form of rhymed couplets. With 10 syllables to a line, iambic pentameter has often been remarked as a very natural-sounding form of verse, akin in some ways to our natural speech patterns. In his introduction, Ives gives us a clear roadmap for how these lines should be read and listened to.

*The Rhythm is “Bum-BUM, Bum-BUM, Bum-BUM, Bum-BUM, Bum-BUM”*

And it’s really that simple. From there, the art of the actor transforms what could be repetitive droll or overemphasized Dr. Seuss manifest — as Mr. Kent puts it — into the truth, lies, heart, and soul of their character. As with any poetic form, there are always variations to this general structure, and as with a time signature, a multitude of musical elements can populate the form to create extremely diverse styles of music. In the case of *The Liar*, the iambic pentameter is inhabited by rhyming couplets that emphasize the final words/syllables of lines, and keep the energy and action of the language leaning forward. Punctuation can land anywhere, as long as the syllables of the words add up, and the ending syllables rhyme.

*Watch out there Mademoiselle! The pavement’s tipped. What luck I caught your hand or you’d have tripped. No, don’t let go. Your stumble was a sign. O sov’reign joy to hold your hand in mine!*
In the above excerpt, Dorante speaks a line that has punctuation within the framework of the rhymed pentameter. This helps maintain the natural flow of speech, at the same time emphasizing and making clearer Dorante’s point of view and intention.

Your son’s this world’s most brilliant adapter,
No doubt in time he’ll add another chapter.

This excerpt is one of the many creative ways in which The Liar is called a liar without being called a liar. Notice that here, the sentence runs on through the end of the line of verse; two lines but just one sentence. This also keeps the flow of language natural and smooth, flowing trippingly off the tongue, while the rhymed verse helps frame and clearly communicate the meaning of this heightened thought.

As you enjoy the play, listen to how the rhyming verse always keeps you listening in. Can you ever predict what line will be spoken next, just from what the verse and context might suggest?

"What luck I caught your hand or you'd have tripped."
Thematic Overview of *The Liar*

Written and adapted in verse, *The Liar* flies high above the contemporary realism we often see on the TV screen. With heightened language often comes an acute consideration of ideas and themes that extend beyond our usual ability to express ourselves. This raucous play has some deep currents running underneath it and explores the very nature of what makes us human.

**Truth**

From characters that are universally bound to fall on one side of a hard line of truth, to the grey area that exists between characters, this play calls into question our relationship with truth. Do we believe what we say to ourselves? Do we tell each other the truth? When we lie, are people aware of our deceit? How can misunderstandings and purposeful deceit make our world more difficult to maneuver?

**Love**

Dorante’s truth in being a liar is transcended by his feelings for Lucrece. Against all her logic, she follows her heart and joins in love with him. Is love more powerful than the truth? How can we be sure that love is true?

**Beauty and Artifice**

This play is predicated on confusion and misunderstanding, driven by attraction to beauty and belief in artifice and lies. How does beauty fool us into believing lies? Can beautiful things and people be trusted? Where does one draw the line between obsession and belief, between truth and artifice?

**Society vs. Self**

One of the primary tensions in the play is between the expression of one’s truth (or lack thereof) and how that interacts with the reality between characters. How can one stay true to oneself when obligated to others? Is it more important to be true to yourself or to be true to your society and the people around you?
Prompts for Further Discussion

1. How do the rhymed iambic couplets and verse in this play affect how you listen to it?

2. Would the play be better if it was written in prose?

3. Is this play from over 350 years ago still relevant? How has the nature of people changed, if at all?

4. Do you agree with the romantic couplings at the end of the play? Who do you think they should have ended up with?

5. Are there any lies told by Dorante or other characters that you think are justified? When is lying moral?

6. Are there any truths told by Cliton or other characters that would have better been left unsaid? When is telling the truth immoral?

7. In a world of fake news, deep-fakes, “alternative facts”, and a world of ever-conflicting narratives, what does a play about a compulsive liar in love tell us about our own nature and how we might navigate this crazy world?

8. Who deserves more credit in the telling of this tale — Pierre Corneille or David Ives?

9. Verse is often carried through the medium of music. Could you imagine a musical version of this play? What would the songs be? What style of music would you choose?

10. How do you define truth? Is it something that exists or is it something that is always in flux as our relationships with others change?

11. What was your favorite bit of physical comedy in the play?

12. Do any lines stick in your head after seeing the play? Which ones do you find yourself repeating?
Further Reading/Listening

Britannica Pierre Corneille Biography
https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pierre-Corneille

NPR’s Robert Siegel interviews David Ives on The Liar

Oxford Reference timeline of French Literary History

Le Cid: A play by Pierre Corneille, translate by Roscoe Mongan,
https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14954/14954-h/14954-h.htm

New Jerusalem: the Interrogation of Baruch de Spinoza at Talmud Torah Congregation: Amsterdam, July 27, 1656. A play by David Ives, found wherever you buy your plays.

The River Seine, France