

## **Plot summary: Molière's *Tartuffe* (also: *the Impostor, the Hypocrite*).**

**Act I:** Madame Pernelle, accompanied by her silent and musically talented servant Flipote, criticizes how her son's household is run. Everyone else – Orgon's young wife Elmire, his brother-in-law Cléante, his children from a previous marriage, Damis and Mariane, and Mariane's matron Dorine – all see how Orgon and his mother Pernelle have fallen under the scheming influence of Tartuffe, a pious fraud and a vagrant prior to Orgon's help. Tartuffe claims to speak with divine authority, while Orgon and his mother, blinded by his ostentatious religiosity, hang on his every word, lavishing honours on the opportunist. Dorine tries unsuccessfully to interest Orgon in his wife's recent health problems, and Cléante attempts to get him to see through Tartuffe's false religious zeal: Orgon pays no attention to either of them and will not give a straight answer about the promised marriage (*hymen*) of his daughter Mariane to Valère.

**Act II:** Orgon speaks to his daughter Mariane alone to explain his plan to marry her to Tartuffe instead of to Valère, her true love. Dorine interrupts them and confronts Orgon about this ill-advised plan: he tries to silence her but she persists in telling the truth until he leaves, furious (*en courroux*). After teasing her about it, Dorine tells Mariane she has to oppose the proposed marriage to Tartuffe more forcefully, and that she supports her desire to wed Valère. Mariane confirms to Valère her father's plan, and the two young lovers manage to misunderstand each other enough to almost break up, were it not for Dorine's intervention to force them to make up and renew their plans to get married.

**Act III:** Damis wants to violently put the impostor out of the picture, but Dorine convinces him to stand down and let his step-mother work on Tartuffe instead. Asking Dorine to cover her cleavage, Tartuffe exchanges sharp words with the matron, who tells him her lady Elmire wants to speak to him. Aroused by the sight of her, Tartuffe declares his lust for Elmire, who rebuffs him but says she will not reveal his dishonourable advances if he will support the marriage of Mariane with Valère. Damis, who has heard their whole exchange, interrupts and wants to tell his father everything despite Elmire's protests. Damis then brings out Orgon and tells him all. Confronted directly about the accusation, Tartuffe doesn't deny anything, instead using reverse psychology to accuse himself of even worse sins. Rather than believing his son, Orgon is once again duped by Tartuffe's false piety: he banishes Damis, disowns him and curses him. He then insists that Tartuffe must stay and spend more time with Elmire, and gives him not only his daughter's hand in marriage but also the gift (*donation*) of all of his property as well.

**Intermission (15 minutes): refreshments are available in the theatre lobby.**

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**Act IV:** Cléante tries to convince Tartuffe to do the right thing: give up on marrying Mariane and try to help Orgon reconcile with his son Damis, but Tartuffe will have none of it. Dorine asks Cléante to help her get Orgon to reverse his decision to marry Mariane to Tartuffe. Mariane throws herself at her father's feet, begging him to reconsider the marriage – she is even willing to enter a convent rather than marry Tartuffe. Dorine and Cléante also try to convince him, to no avail. Elmire challenges her husband to witness Tartuffe's villainy directly, and Orgon reluctantly agrees to hide and listen until he has heard enough. Tartuffe arrives and Elmire leads him on so that he reveals his lustful intentions where Orgon can hear him. When he has finally heard enough, Orgon confronts the impostor Tartuffe and kicks him out, but not before Tartuffe plays his trump card: the house now belongs to him as a result of Orgon's earlier gift. Elmire questions her husband about these words, and Orgon evasively refers to a document case (*cassette*) that he has to look for urgently.

**Act V:** Panicking, Orgon explains to Cléante that Tartuffe had previously taken charge of the document case (filled with incriminating letters entrusted to him by a fleeing friend) and this gives him serious leverage over Orgon. Cléante points out how dangerous the situation is and Damis arrives ready (as usual) to defend his family's honour with violence. Cléante calms them both down. Pernelle refuses to believe what her son has witnessed about their lecherous guest, infuriating Orgon by insisting that he must be mistaken about Tartuffe. Their despair is interrupted by Monsieur Loyal, a sergeant at arms (*huissier à verge*) who comes to enforce a legal order: they are all to be evicted from the house, which now belongs to Tartuffe. Dorine mocks Monsieur Loyal's false "loyalty" and Cléante convinces Loyal to leave. Even Madame Pernelle is finally convinced of Tartuffe's duplicity. Valère rushes in with the news that Tartuffe has denounced Orgon for keeping the incriminating letters, and that the Prince has ordered Orgon's arrest.

Orgon is about to flee with Valère when Tartuffe arrives with a royal officer (*l'Exempt*), but to everyone's surprise, the officer arrests Tartuffe instead. The officer explains that the enlightened Prince is appalled by Tartuffe's treachery towards Orgon. It also turns out that Tartuffe has a long criminal history under a different name. As a reward for Orgon's previous good services, the Prince not only forgives him for keeping his friend's incriminating letters but also invalidates the deed that gave Tartuffe possession of all of Orgon's property. Relieved, the entire household thanks their lucky stars and the drama ends happily with the upcoming wedding of Mariane and Valère.