The Illusion

by Tony Kushner

Freely adapted from
Pierre Corneille’s
L’Illusion Comique

Theatre Pro Rata
June 12-28, 2015
Performing at Park Square Theatre
Andy Boss Thrust Stage
About the play
Pierre Corneille wrote *L'Illusion Comique* in 1636 when he was 29 years old. The play was performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne that year and was published in 1639. The story begins with Pridamant, a man who desperately seeks to find out the fate of his son, who had left home some years before. He approaches a magician, Alcandre, whom he hopes will be able to help him. Alcandre’s remarkable skills allow Pridamant to actually see the course of his son’s life enacted before his eyes. Tony Kushner’s adaptation, *The Illusion*, was produced in New York in 1988. As an adaptation rather than a translation, Kushner’s play—while essentially faithful to Corneille—also includes some changes and additions, and brings this 17th century tale to life with its vivid and lively language.


About Tony Kushner

Tony Kushner was born in Manhattan in 1956, but spent his childhood in Lake Charles, Louisiana. He returned to New York in 1974 where he completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Medieval Studies at Columbia College in 1978. He pursued graduate work at the Tisch School for the Arts. His best known work is *Angels in America*, which won
the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1993. In addition to *The Illusion*, Kushner has also adapted plays by Brecht (*The Good Person of Szechwan*) and Ansky (*The Dybbuk*). He received a National Medal of the Arts in 2013.

More info:
Tony Kushner on *The Illusion* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWBlmuB74N8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWBlmuB74N8)

Wikipedia

*Paris Review* interview

About Pierre Corneille

Pierre Corneille was born in 1606 in Rouen, France, and is considered one of the three great French dramatists of the 17th century, along with Molière and Racine. The son of a lawyer, he originally studied law, but was not especially successful. He brought a play he had written to a group of actors in 1629 and moved to Paris that same year and pursued a successful career as a playwright for the next 40 years.


“In the dedication [to *L’Illusion comique*, Corneille] calls the play ‘a strange monster’; he also deems it ‘bizarre and extravagant’ and insists that he has created something totally new. The play is indeed original, and it was greatly appreciated by the public in 1635-1636 when the other comedies were seen as outmoded. Still
performed frequently, *L'Illusion comique* is great fun, despite opening with a father in distress.”


“*L'Illusion comique* holds a curious place in Corneille’s comic oeuvre, so different in many respects from the preceding works. Like the other plays, it is designated a comédie and yet in its conception of the term it suggests a marked difference from them. Here, Corneille visibly reverts to those elements of the tragi-comedy which had had quite strikingly rejected before: violent stage action, excitement and suspense, the thrill of a surprising dénouement.”


**Matamore, an enduring comic type**

Matamore, the self-dramatizing military man who disguises his cowardice with his bravado and exuberant language, has existed as a character type since Roman playwright Plautus’s comedy *Miles Gloriosus*, which can be translated as the swaggering or vainglorious soldier. The braggart soldier became a stock character in subsequent theatrical work, including *Il Capitano* in Italian commedia and Shakespeare’s *Ancient Pistol* in the history plays.

Several other characters also draw on Italian commedia, including the male and female lovers, the female servant, and the rich merchant with an adventurous daughter.

Magic & Mystery

The Conjurer, Hieronymos Bosch/workshop (1450-1516)

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

—Arthur C. Clarke

When Corneille wrote *L’Illusion comique* in the 17th century, he set the play in his own time and placed his magician in his home country of France. Yet the story of a father who has alienated his son and longs to reconnect with him is one that plays out again and again in time. In the 21st century, “magic” surrounds us in the form of technological advances that most of us use on a regular basis, even though we may not understand how they work.

For our production, we bring the magic somewhat closer to home by recreating a world that was a notable part of popular culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the years before the internet, television, radio, and even movies, entertainment happened in homes and in local theaters. One restored local example is the Sheldon Theatre in Red Wing ([http://sheldontheatre.org/page/history](http://sheldontheatre.org/page/history)). Traveling shows, stage plays, and vaudeville provided lively entertainment across the United States and Canada during those years. Vaudeville was especially prominent from the 1880s through the early 1930s (the development of the film industry and the Great Depression led to its demise). Acts included magicians, popular and classical musicians, comedians, dancers, acrobats, scenes from plays, famous lecturers, and more. A night out at the local theatre was a promise of pleasure and enchantment in a world somewhat less cynical than ours, somewhat more willing to believe in magic.