

London Assurance

By Dion Boucicault

Director: Brian Bedford
Designer: Desmond Heeley
Lighting designer: Michael J. Whitfield
Composer: Don Horsburgh
Sound designer: Jeff Riches

Avon Theatre
May 20 to October 21
Opens June 1

ABOUT THE PLAY

OVERVIEW

First performed in 1841, *London Assurance* brought overnight success to the Irish-born playwright Dion Boucicault, then barely 20 years old. A romantic comedy about a father and son who become rivals in love, it is one of very few plays from the 19th century that are still performed today.

Although in many ways it harks back to the 18th-century comedy of Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Oliver Goldsmith, *London Assurance* also foreshadows the style – and some of the situations – of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, written more than half a century later.

SYNOPSIS

Sir Harcourt Courtly, an aging but still vain man-about-town, is intent on marrying heiress Grace Harkaway, the 18-year-old niece of his old friend Squire Max Harkaway. Grace has little option but to accept the match; otherwise, under the terms of her father’s will, her fortune must pass to Sir Harcourt’s heir.

Grace’s professed indifference to her situation becomes harder to sustain, however, when she finds herself attracted to another, much younger suitor, one “Augustus Hamilton,” who arrives at her country home in the company of Richard Dazzle, a con artist who has wangled an invitation from the squire. Neither Grace nor her uncle realizes that “Augustus” is, in reality, Sir Harcourt’s profligate son, Charles, who has taken this opportunity to hide from his creditors.

The complications multiply when Charles’s father also arrives on the scene – to say nothing of the troublesome lawyer Mark Meddle, who more than lives up to his name. Adding even further to the fun is Grace’s cousin, the hearty horsewoman Lady Gay Spanker, who undertakes to help Charles and Grace by distracting Sir Harcourt from his marital plans with the false promise of an illicit escapade.

SOURCES AND ORIGINS

London Assurance owes its existence in part to a case of mistaken identity. Under his stage name of Lee Moreton, Boucicault had sent a manuscript to the actor-manager Charles Mathews, who ran the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, with his wife, Elizabeth Vestris (universally known as “Madame Vestris”). Mathews, under the impression that the manuscript was actually by another (and at the time much better known) playwright named John Maddison Morton, summoned “Lee Moreton” into his presence and commissioned him to write a full-scale “five-act comedy of modern life,” with suitable roles for Mathews himself and his wife.

It took Boucicault only 30 days to complete the first draft, and the first reading took place on February 5, 1841.

STAGE HISTORY

London Assurance was first performed on March 4, 1841, at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, in London, England. It was a huge success, running for three months.

The play’s first New York production opened at the Park Theatre on October 11, 1841, with the celebrated Shakespearean actress Charlotte Cushman as Lady Gay Spanker.

There have been five major revivals in New York: at Daly’s Fifth Avenue Theatre in 1869; at the Knickerbocker Theatre in 1905; at the Vanderbilt Theatre in 1937; at the Palace Theatre (in a production directed by Ronald Eyre, with Donald Sinden as Sir Harcourt Courtly and Roger Rees as Charles) in 1974; and, most recently, by the Roundabout Theatre Company at the Criterion Center Stage Right in 1997.

Brian Bedford was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Actor in a Play for his performance as Sir Harcourt in this last revival, which was directed by Festival alumnus Joe Dowling. Helen Carey, who played Lady Gay Spanker (and who performed in the 1970 and 1982 seasons at Stratford), was nominated for Best Actress in a Play, and the production as a whole was nominated for Best Revival of a Play.

STRATFORD FESTIVAL STAGE HISTORY

This is the first production of *London Assurance* at the Stratford Festival. No other play by Dion Boucicault has been performed here.

IN OTHER TERMS

In 1976, Anthony Andrews played Charles Courtly in a BBC television production of *London Assurance*. Mr. Andrews is best known for his leading role in the celebrated television mini-series *Brideshead Revisited*, which was directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, director of the Stratford Festival’s 2005 production of *The Lark*.

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

PERIOD AND SETTING

As written, *London Assurance* takes place in London and Gloucestershire, England, in 1841. This production places the rural scenes in Yorkshire rather than Gloucestershire. The costumes, designed by Desmond Heeley, reflect the transition in styles from the Regency to the late 1830s. There are three full sets.

SELECTED ARTISTIC PERSONNEL

London Assurance is directed by **Brian Bedford**, who also plays the role of Sir Harcourt Courtly. This is Mr. Bedford's 25th season at the Stratford Festival; leading parts he has played here since 1975 include such Shakespearean roles as Richard II, Richard III, Benedick, Jaques, Bottom, Shylock, Macbeth, Timon, Malvolio and Feste, as well as Tartuffe, Sir Peter Teazle in *The School for Scandal*, Salieri in *Amadeus*, Elyot Chase in *Private Lives*, Charles Condomine in *Blithe Spirit*, Martin Dysart in *Equus* and Garry Essendine in *Present Laughter*. His directing credits include *Fallen Angels*, *Present Laughter*, *Waiting for Godot*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Coriolanus*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Rivals*, *Blithe Spirit*, *Phaedra*, *Equus* and *Othello*. On Broadway, he has six times been nominated for a Tony Award (winning for his portrayal of Arnolphe in *The School for Wives* in 1971) and has been inducted into New York's Theater Hall of Fame. This season, Mr. Bedford also plays Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*.

Lady Gay Spanker is played by **Seana McKenna**, now in her 15th season at the Stratford Festival. Ms McKenna's past Festival credits include last season's *Orpheus Descending* and *Fallen Angels*, as well as *Medea*, *Private Lives*, *Noises Off*, *Tartuffe*, *The Night of the Iguana* and *Good Mother*. Her Shakespearean roles include Juliet, Viola, Portia, Katherina the shrew and six queens (at Stratford); Beatrice (at the Manitoba Theatre Centre); Hermione (Kansas City Rep); and Cleopatra (Centauro). She loved playing Eliza Doolittle (Shaw Festival), Hedda Gabler (MTC), Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (MTC; The Grand), Blanche and Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Theatre New Brunswick; MTC/Citadel; Huntington) and all 17 roles in *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (Belfry/MTC; Grand/Neptune/National Arts Centre). She has received two Dora Mavor Moore Awards, for *Saint Joan* and for directing *Valley Song*; one Jessie Award, for *Wit* (Vancouver Playhouse/CanStage); a Genie Award for *The Hanging Garden*; and, last year, an unsolicited Tyrone Guthrie Award for mentorship. This season, Ms McKenna also plays Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*.

The cast also includes **Sean Arbuckle** as Richard Dazzle, **James Blendick** as Max Harkaway, **Keith Dinicol** as Cool, **Sophie Goulet** as Pert, **Jean-Michel Le Gal** as Martin, **Tim MacDonald** as Mark Meddle, **Andrew Massingham** as Constable Isaacs, **Adam O'Bryne** as Charles Courtly, **Sara Topham** as Grace Harkaway and **Brian Tree** as Adolphus Spanker.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

DION BOUCICAULT (c. 1820–1890)

Dionysius Lardner Boursiquot – he later changed his name to its present spelling – was born in Dublin on December 26, 1820, to French wine merchant Samuel Boursiquot and his much younger Irish wife, Anna. It is speculated that his real father was the encyclopedist and scientist Dr. Dionysius Lardner, who rented rooms for a time in the Boursiquot household.

Schooled mainly in England (at Dr. Lardner's expense), young Dion was soon drawn to the theatre, writing plays and interludes and acting Irish roles on provincial stages under the name "Lee Moreton." In 1838, he appeared in his own play, *A Legend of the Devil's Dyke*, in the English seaside resort town of Brighton, but it was not a success. Early in 1841, however, he completed the first draft of *London Assurance*, which he had been commissioned to write by actor-manager Charles Mathews, who ran the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, with his wife and business partner, Madame Vestris.

The success of *London Assurance* brought Boucicault considerable fame – along with considerable hostility among theatrical and literary circles – but his taste for extravagant living ensured that the £300 he was paid for it was soon gone. In 1844, finding himself in financial straits, he went to Paris, where he began translating and adapting French plays and other works, such as Alexandre Dumas' novel *The Corsican Brothers*, for the English stage. On 9 July, 1845, he married a French widow, Anne Guiot, but she died less than three years later.

In June 1852, he appeared in London in his own melodrama *The Vampire*. Also in the cast was Agnes Robertson, adopted daughter of Charles Kean, who became his second wife in 1853. The couple moved to the United States, where they lived and worked for the next seven years, though Boucicault continued to produce translations and adaptations of French works – including a version of Jean François Casimir Delavigne's *Louis XI* in 1855 – for production in London. He also enjoyed great successes on the New York stage with such plays as *The Colleen Bawn*, adapted from Gerald Griffin's novel *The Collegians*, and the abolitionist drama *The Octoroon*.

Returning to London in 1860, Boucicault scored further hits with London productions of *The Colleen Bawn* and *The Octoroon*. Other successes included *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864); *Rip van Winkle* (1866), adapted from the story by Washington Irving; and *The Shaughraun* (1875).

In 1875 he again made his home in New York, returning occasionally to London, where he made his last stage appearance, in his play *The Jilt*, in 1885. The same year, he left Agnes and married – apparently bigamously – a young actress named Lorraine Thorndyke, with whom he lived until his death in New York on September 18, 1890.

RELATED EVENT

TABLE TALK

Before the evening performance of *London Assurance* on Wednesday, August 9, enjoy a buffet dinner and an informal talk on the play by Graham Roebuck, professor emeritus of McMaster University. The event begins at 5:30 p.m. in the Festival Theatre's Paul D. Fleck Marquee. Cost (not including performance ticket): \$30. Cash bar.

OTHER ITEMS OF INTEREST

FROM COUNTRY TO TOWN

Boucicault's original title for *London Assurance* was *Country Matters*, a quotation from a bawdily suggestive line that Hamlet delivers to Ophelia in Act III, scene 2, of Shakespeare's famous tragedy. During rehearsals for the play's first production, Boucicault changed the title to *Out of Town*. It was Madame Vestris, though, whom he credited with the final choice of title.

AND WHO WAS "MADAME VESTRIS"?

Madame Vestris, Charles Mathews's wife and co-manager with him of the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, where *London Assurance* premiered, was born Lucia Elizabetta Bartolozzi in 1797. An actress and singer, she was 16 when she married ballet-master Auguste Armand Vestris. Though her husband left her a few years later, she continued to use Madame Vestris as her professional name.

AN EARLY FORM OF EARNEST?

It has often been remarked that *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by Oscar Wilde (who is known to have seen *London Assurance*) owes some debt to Boucicault's comedy. Grace, in *London Assurance*, may be seen as a forerunner of Cecily in *Earnest* (both young women are sheltered English roses given to surprisingly elaborate locution), while the use of false identities and the sudden demise of "Augustus Hamilton" in *London Assurance* find their counterpart in Jack's rural alias and Algernon's "Bunburying" in *Earnest*.

THE SOURCE OF "SOLLOCKS"?

The creditor from whom Charles flees in an early scene of *London Assurance* is named Solomon Isaacs (though in this production, the character is portrayed as a policeman, Constable Isaacs). In Noël Coward's comedy *Private Lives*, the code phrase that Elyot

and Amanda devise in an attempt to stop themselves from squabbling with each other is “Solomon Isaacs,” which they immediately shorten to “Sollocks.” A character named Solomon Isaacs also appears in Mark Twain’s unfinished novel *The Mysterious Stranger*, which he worked on from around 1890 until his death in 1910.

A SNAPSHOT OF THE SHAUGHRAUN

In her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Age of Innocence*, published in 1920, Edith Wharton describes a moment in the life of New York in the early 1870s: “It was a crowded night at Wallack’s theater. The play was *The Shaughraun*, with Dion Boucicault in the title role. The popularity of the admirable English company was at its height, and *The Shaughraun* always packed the house. In the galleries the enthusiasm was unreserved; in the stalls and boxes people smiled a little ... and enjoyed the play as much as the galleries did.”

ON THE INTERNET

BIOGRAPHY OF DION BOUCICAULT, WITH PHOTOGRAPH

<http://www.wayneturney.20m.com/boucicault.htm>

CARTOON OF BOUCICAULT AS AN ACTOR

<http://www.npg.org.uk/live/search/portrait.asp?mkey=mw83795>