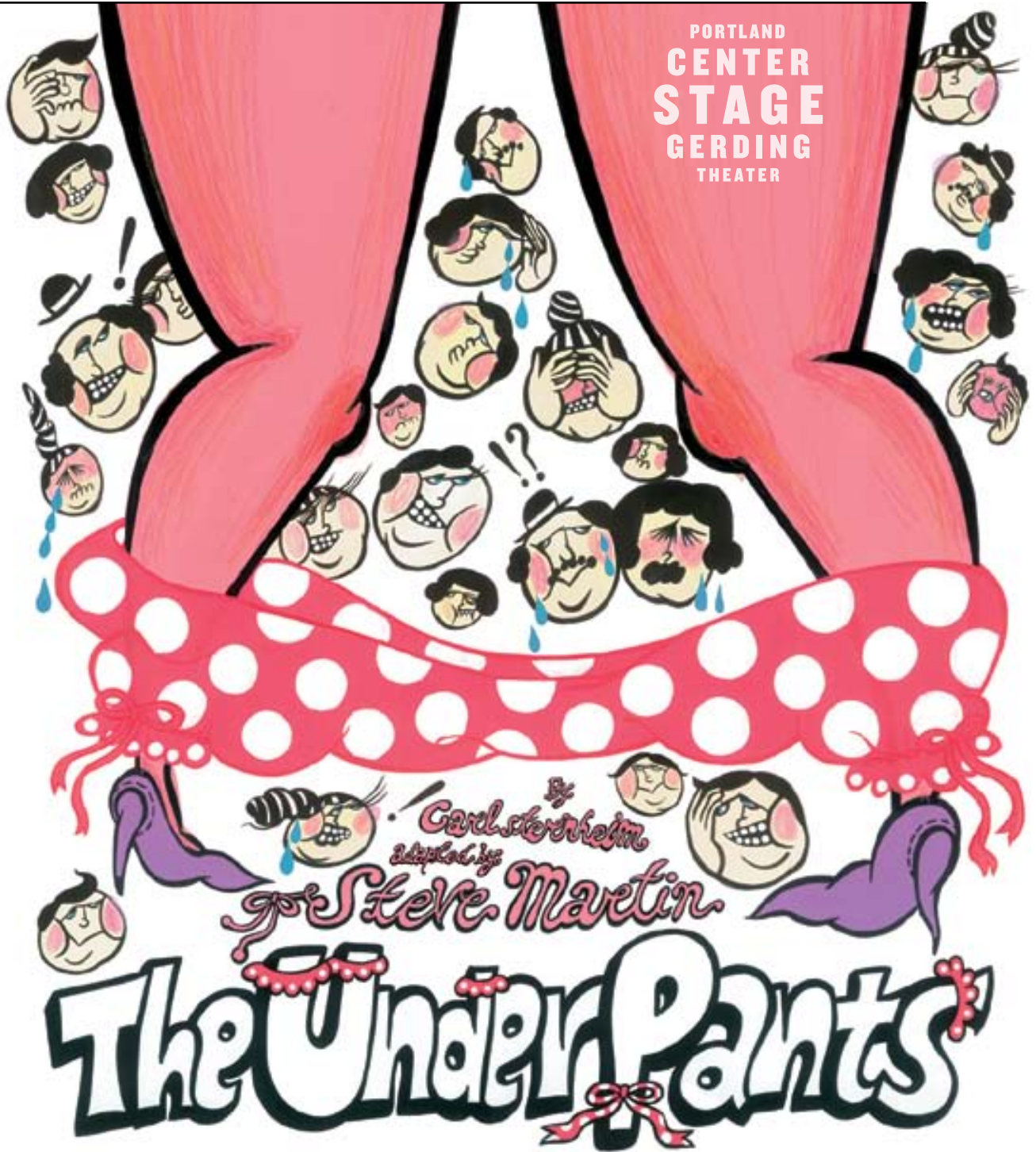


PORTLAND
CENTER
STAGE
GERDING
THEATER



THE GUIDE THE UNDERPANTS

A THEATERGOER'S RESOURCE PREPARED FOR PORTLAND CENTER STAGE BY KELSEY TYLER
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Gerding Theater at the Armory, 128 NW Eleventh Ave, Portland, OR 97209



CONTENTS



| | |
|--|----|
| SYNOPSIS | 2 |
| THE CHARACTERS | 2 |
| ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT | 3 |
| ABOUT THE ADAPTER | 4 |
| EXPOSING MORE THAN <i>UNDERPANTS</i> : Steve Martin turns an obscure 1911 German play into a relevant examination of momentary fame in modern America by Richard Stayton..... | 6 |
| GLOSSARY | 9 |
| DISCUSSION TOPICS AND CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES | 10 |
| SOURCES | 10 |

SYNOPSIS

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SPOILER ALERT!

This summary reveals crucial plot points.

Louise, a pretty young wife with an inattentive husband, is thrilled to have the opportunity to see the King on parade. As she stretches to get a better view, her dainty underpants slide down around her ankles. Embarrassed, she quickly retrieves them and hopes no one has noticed. The reaction of her husband, Theo, a stuffy bureaucrat, is not to comfort his wife, but to express concern that her indiscretion may affect his reputation and career aspirations.

Louise's husband may be unaware of her feelings and charms, but they have not escaped the attention of two men who witnessed the underpants incident and have come to rent a room in the couple's flat in the hopes of romancing Louise. Theo, oblivious to the threat to his marriage, conspires to split the room and rent to them both in an effort to double his money. Gertrude, a nosy neighbor, urges the naïve Louise toward an amorous affair with one of the men, while the men themselves try to outdo and undermine the other.

All this admiration brings Louise to a new understanding of her circumstances, her own worth and empowerment. By the time the King shows up looking to rent a room (it seems he, too, witnessed the underpants event), Louise has developed an understanding of how to get what she wants in the world.



THE CHARACTERS



THEO MASKE A burly, muscular fireplug with a buzz cut.

LOUISE MASKE Theo's pretty wife.

GERTRUDE DEUTER A busybody neighbor to Theo and Louise.

FRANK VERSATI An elegant gentleman who prides himself on writing love poetry, and hopes to rent a room from Theo.

BENJAMIN COHEN A sickly, thin, asthmatic hairdresser, who also hopes to rent a room.

KLINGLEHOFF An older man and a scientist also in search of a room.

THE KING The King.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



STERNHEIM, CARL (1878–1942)

Born in Leipzig to a Jewish banker and his Protestant wife from a working-class family, Sternheim grew up in Hanover and Berlin. Between 1897 and 1902, he studied philosophy, psychology, and jurisprudence intermittently at the Universities of Munich, Göttingen, and Leipzig, but never graduated. In 1900, he began working as a freelance writer in Weimar, where he met and married his first wife, Eugenie Hauth, the same year. Their union ended in 1906 and he married the writer Thea Löwenstein (née Bauer) in 1907, with whom he had two children.

The wealth brought by Thea from her rich manufacturing family enabled the couple to build the Schloss Bellemaison in Munich. Here, Sternheim worked in the company of fellow artists such as Mechtilde Lichnowsky, Max Reinhardt, and Frank Wedekind, and assembled his own art collection. In 1908, he collaborated with Franz Blei to launch the Expressionist literary journal *Hyperion*, which published the first eight prose works by Franz Kafka. He also contributed occasionally to the Expressionist journal *Die Aktion*. In 1912, he relocated with his family to Belgium; in 1918, they fled the fighting of World War I and temporarily moved to St. Moritz and Uttwil in Switzerland. Sternheim and Thea divorced in 1927. His next marriage, to actress and singer Pamela Wedekind, took place in 1930 and lasted until 1934, after which he lived with Henriette Carbonara. Sternheim died in Brussels during World War II and was buried in the Ixelles Cemetery.

Sternheim's circle of prominent friends included Gottfried Benn, Carl Einstein, Franz Pfemfert, Walther Rathenau, Ernst Stadler, Hugo von Tschudi, Fritz von Unruh, and Otto Vrieslander. In 1915, he presented the prize money for the Fontane Prize to the then largely unknown Kafka. The Nazi authorities banned Sternheim's work not only because of his Jewish descent but also because of his savage comedic assaults on the perceived moral corruption of the German bourgeoisie.

Sternheim's growing concern with politics and social and individual responsibility gave rise to the drama *Tabula Rasa* (1916), in which the central character, a self-seeking workers' representative, betrays his class and joins the bourgeoisie. However, there is no social satire in the powerful and eloquent *Die Marquise von Arcis* (1919), borrowed from a story by the French philosopher Denis Diderot, which pleads against the rigid conventions that condemn individuals to their station in life. In true German expressionist manner, it demands the emergence of a new human in a new society.



His series of comedies collectively entitled *Aus dem bürgerlichen Heldenleben (From the Heroic Life of the Bourgeoisie)* (1910–22) turned a savage, satirical eye on the philistinism and questionable morality of contemporary society and attracted the attention of the censor. Sternheim's criticism of bourgeois hypocrisy is further elaborated in *Bürger Schippel (Citizen Schippel)* (1913).

His political comedy *Der Kandidat (The Candidate)* (1914) is based on a work by the French novelist Gustave Flaubert. The series *Aus dem bürgerlichen Heldenleben (From the Heroic Life of the Bourgeoisie)* includes a trilogy of plays—*Die Hose (The Underpants)* (1911), *Der Snob (A Place in the World)* (1914), and *1913 (1915)*—about three generations of a family of social climbers.

ABOUT THE ADAPTER



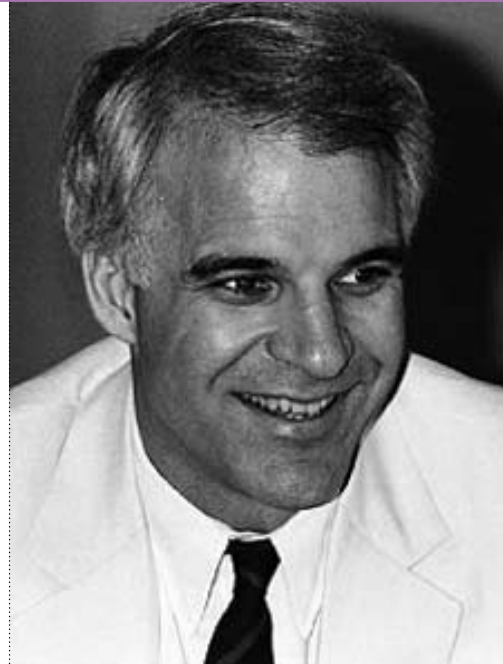
STEVE MARTIN

This silver-haired, physically expressive performer successfully shifted from being one of the most popular standup comics of the 1970s to a respected film actor of the 80s and 90s. Steve Martin began performing his material in clubs in the late 60s before establishing his reputation as a sharp TV comedy writer. He won an Emmy for his work on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* in 1972 and less than a decade later returned to performance. It wasn't long before Martin was a comedy superstar, filling stadiums, releasing platinum records, coining catch phrases ("Well excuuuse me!") and making zany, inspired appearances on *The Tonight Show* and *Saturday Night Live*. He even enjoyed a highly popular single on the pop record charts with his half-spoken, half-sung comic rendition of "King Tut." Martin launched a successful film career with *The Jerk* (1979), a hilariously silly comedy whose success paved the way to feature careers for other 70s comedians, including Robin Williams and Billy Crystal.

While Martin's laudably lowbrow early movies gave little indication of career longevity, the 80s saw him develop into a leading comic actor and capable dramatic player in films, including the offbeat revisionist musical drama *Pennies From Heaven* (1981) and the unremarkable but pleasant mainstream comedy *Parenthood* (1989). His most outstanding performances include his award-winning work in the farce *All of Me* (1984), in which his confused body had to accommodate the spirit of both his own personality and that of a woman (Lily Tomlin), and his surprisingly touching and graceful acting in *Roxanne* (1987), a modern day comic revamp of *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

In the 90s, Martin became a Hollywood hyphenate, producing, writing and starring in the quirky romantic comedy *L.A. Story* (1991) opposite then-wife Victoria Tennant. Although fine in a dramatic stretch as a Joel Silver-like producer in Lawrence Kasdan's *Grand Canyon* (1991), he enjoyed perhaps his greatest commercial successes in light Disney comedies, starring as the put-upon dad in the remake of *Father of the Bride* (1991) and in *Housesitter* (1992) as an uptight architect whose life is disrupted by female grifter Goldie Hawn. He reunited with Diane Keaton in 1995 for the warm-hearted sequel *Father of the Bride II* and with Hawn for the lackluster 1999 remake of *Out of Towners*. Whereas Martin's earlier films expertly showcased his manic qualities, his later work demonstrated his competence as a straight man and comic foil.

Martin subsequently attempted to stretch himself as a film performer, but the results were uneven and commercially unsuccessful. He proved light on his feet, if ultimately joyless and opaque, playing a charlatan faith healer in the largely dramatic *Leap of Faith* (1992). Martin returned to Disney's Touchstone



division for an atypical assignment as executive producer and scripter of *A Simple Twist of Fate* (1994), a polished yet problematic adaptation of George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. He was effective as a gloomy recluse who reconnects with life by raising an infant girl abandoned on his doorstep but audiences detected a downer and steered clear. Martin returned to more conventional comedy with *Mixed Nuts* (1995), a remake of a French film (*Le Pere Noel est une ordure*) about a telephone crisis center. The Christmas-themed comedy proved a critical and commercial disaster despite major talents before and behind the camera, including writer director Nora Ephron, Madeline Kahn, Rob Reiner, Juliette Lewis and Garry Shandling.

In 1993, Martin made his debut as a playwright with *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, a comic fantasy about a meeting between the celebrated painter and Albert Einstein in a Paris bar in 1904 shortly before they achieved worldwide fame. The one-act play started out in an Australian workshop and had its premiere in Chicago as a Steppenwolf Theatre Company presentation. The show became a hit in Los Angeles in 1994 where its originally scheduled six-week run was extended to nine months. *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* opened Off-Broadway in the fall of 1995 to respectable reviews and a healthy box of-



face. *WASP and Other Plays* followed soon after at the Public Theater to further confirm Martin's status as a significant new voice on the theater scene.

Having taken a few years off from films to concentrate on his writing, Martin returned to the big screen in 1998 in two vastly different movie roles. He delivered a strong supporting turn as a mysterious businessman in David Mamet's psychological drama *The Spanish Prisoner* and lent his voice to the wily servant Hotep in DreamWorks' animated Moses musical *The Prince of Egypt*. The following year he combined his two loves, penning the sharp, witty *Bowfinger* (1999), a hilarious satire that successfully skewered Hollywood stereotypes. Martin portrayed Bobby Bowfinger, an unsuccessful producer who convinces several other bottom feeders he has gotten the world's biggest action star (fellow *SNL*-er Eddie Murphy) to appear in his inane alien movie *Chubby Rain*. In reality, he sets the C list actors up to interact with Murphy in public so he can film the star without his knowledge. Martin next switched gears to undertake a more dramatic role as a dentist suspected of murdering a patient in the thriller *Novocaine* (2001).

By 2003, Martin ranked fourth on the box office stars list, after co-starring in *Bringing Down the House* and starring in *Cheaper by the Dozen*, each of which earned over \$130 million at U.S. theaters. Both were family comedies. In 2005, Martin wrote and starred in *Shopgirl*, based on his own novella. Martin played a wealthy businessman who strikes up a romance with a Saks 5th Avenue counter girl (Claire Danes). He also starred in *Cheaper by the Dozen 2* that year. In a 2005 poll to find The Comedian's Comedian, Martin was voted one of the top 15 greatest comedy acts ever by fellow comedians and comedy insiders. On October 23, 2005, Martin was presented with the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor. Martin's last work to date was the 2006 installment of *The Pink Panther*, standing in Peter Sellers' shoes as the bumbling Inspector Clouseau. In 2007, he announced on his website that he would likely be starting work on the sequel later in the year.



Steve Martin turns an obscure 1911 German play into a relevant examination of momentary fame in modern America

Steve Martin has had more than 25 years to contemplate the nature of fame, and he has a few favorite tales of his own.

"I had a hat and sunglasses on," he says, "which is what I always wear. I'm not trying to disguise myself." Indeed, Martin had just entered the Peninsula Beverly Hills hotel lobby for a series of meetings wearing a baseball hat and sunglasses. "A guy passed by and said ..." -- Martin leans low to whisper in a conspiratorial accent -- "'Enjoy your anonymity.'" Then the guy walked on into the park."

The very famous comic laughs happily, delighted by the ironies. "That's my favorite!" But some moments are less lighthearted. Last week, Martin went to see rehearsals for *The Underpants*, which opens at the Geffen Playhouse on Wednesday. It has been more than two years since Martin last saw his adaptation of German playwright Carl Sternheim's obscure 1911 satire, and he had forgotten its climactic moment. Watching it, he felt, was suddenly "chilling." In the Peninsula hotel, Martin now repeats his heroine's words, employing a veteran actor's character-driven empathy: "Something leaves me surprisingly empty...." Pause. "My fame is gone."

In the age of Paris Hilton and reality TV, are there more chillingly silly words to be uttered? Since he wrote *The Underpants* for the Classic Stage Company in New York in 2002, Martin has been working, doing stuff few famous people do: hosting the 75th annual Academy Awards; adapting and acting in a film version of his best-selling novella, *Shopgirl*, to be released this fall); writing a second novel, *The Pleasure of My Company*;

starring in *Cheaper by the Dozen* and *Bringing Down the House*; and writing *The Pink Panther*, a prequel to the popular series and the first to star Martin as the bumbling Inspector Clouseau. For such an artist, work is integral to fame.

When the Classic Stage's then-artistic director Barry Edelstein invited him to try adapting a play he'd never heard of, Martin simply said, "I like the title." He then proceeded to take what was essentially a political and marital farce and turn it into an exploration of the vagaries of fame. The premise remains that of the original: in 1910 Dusseldorf, Germany, during a full-dress military parade, the wife of a petty state bureaucrat drops her underpants as the Kaiser rides by. Was it an accident? Or was it a Freudian slip by a sex-starved, neglected, bored housewife? Public scandal leads to notoriety, which leads to a brief flirtation with potential seducers who glimpsed her private parts, which leads to 15 minutes of dubious fame before the housewife is abruptly discarded back into grim obscurity.

At least that's how Sternheim's original satire of adultery concluded. However, Martin invented scenes, changed the ending and "modernized" the story. It is his own words, not Sternheim's, that sent a chill through the visiting playwright during the rehearsal.

"She was briefly the center of attention," Martin says with lingering traces of sorrow for his mid-



dle-class heroine. “I think about people who had momentary fame for a couple of years and then it’s gone -- people in reality TV or a one-hit wonder in the music industry. Child actors have to deal with it a lot. They grow older, they’re not on a sitcom anymore ... or when events thrust people into fame....”

He pulls another story from his personal narrative file. “During the O.J. Simpson [case],” he remembers, “I was in Europe, so I missed a lot of the details of what was going on. I happened to see the car chase [on TV] and that was about it. Weeks later, I came back to L.A. I was at a little lunch restaurant on Melrose, and a guy came up to my table, stuck out his hand, and said, ‘Steve. Kato.’ I didn’t know who he was. His fame was kind of accidental, or tangential, and that’s what this play was about for me.”

But finding that meaning was difficult work for Martin at first, even with a literal translation from the German that had been commissioned by the Classic Stage Company.

Die Hosen, Sternheim’s first in a six-play cycle titled *Comedies from the Heroic Life of the Middle Class*, was banned by the imperial authorities and then by the Nazis. For the world premiere, which was staged by the legendary Max Reinhardt, the Berlin censor would approve its production only after the title was changed to *The Giant*, a reference to the heroics of the bombastic, egomaniacal husband whose machismo doesn’t include sexually satisfying his wife. (Later English titles include *The Unmentionables* and *A Pair of Drawers*.)

“As I read the original,” Martin remembers, “I’d realize I didn’t know what just happened. It didn’t make sense. There was an untranslatable element in the original, which was a kind of verbal byplay. Almost like winking at the audience a bit. I could never figure out what that was. I read contemporary descriptions of the play, and I could see there was something beyond me and maybe even beyond translation because it was so linked to the times. But if it doesn’t play now, you’re not doing the original playwright any service. Working on it, I asked myself: ‘Will this be a historical look at the play or will this be a modern entertainment?’ And I decided to make it a modern entertainment, using Sternheim’s themes and some of his lines.

“And then I found out as I was writing it that what it was about then was not going to work now for me as a writer. I found something else that it was about: fame. So I changed the thrust of the play from being a social commentary about the stupidity of the proletariat to sort of a discourse on momentary fame.”

A flowing undercurrent

Martin’s aesthetic decision emerged from his core preoccupations. He writes eloquently and often about the erotic obsessions of men for women. In *Shopgirl*, the novella that Martin

prefers to label a “tone poem,” a middle-aged millionaire grows obsessed because, as the text reveals, “he cannot tell if the surface he glimpsed under Mirabelle’s blouse was her skin or a flesh-colored nylon underthing. He lets the symbols of sex form their own strict logic. The white blouse implies the skin, which implies the bra, which implies her breasts, which implies her neck and her hair.”

Ultimately, access provides “a unification of his self, made possible by the possession of his very opposite.” And so in Martin’s revision of *The Underpants*, an unpublished — “and proud of it” — poet fondles a pair of women’s undergarments, saying: “Soft. Sheer. That’s nice. Thrilling to touch, but not as thrilling as the skin beneath it.” These lines could just as easily appear in many of Martin’s original works.

But a darker element continuously disturbed Martin while he worked on the adaptation: anti-Semitism. “There are very touchy things in the play,” Martin admits, including a Jewish barber who risks his life to get close to the lady of the underpants. “So that’s delicate for a white Texan to handle. In the original play, the Holocaust really resonates because it was written prior to the horrible events. You could see it coming in the Sternheim. I had a debate with Barry Edelstein whether the author was anti-Semitic or not. I thought not. I read research that sounded like he wasn’t. He was saying this class was behaving badly toward the Jews. We never really resolved it.”

In the New York premiere, director Edelstein gave the actor portraying the German bureaucrat a Hitlerian mustache and hair. But at the Geffen, director John Rando vows to concentrate on the comic: sexual obsession as farce.

“This play would basically never get any attention in the American theater,” admits Rando, the Tony-winning director of *Urinetown*. “But Steve breathed new life into a production that would otherwise be forgotten. Besides, the term ‘German farce’ is an oxymoron except in Martin’s hands.”

The Underpants is scheduled to close the first decade of the Geffen Playhouse as the venerable Westwood theater goes dark for more than



a year during renovation. Producing director Gilbert Cates selected the play in part because Martin's comedy *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* opened the Geffen 10 years ago. But it's not simple symmetry that brings *The Underpants* to L.A.

When this adaptation opened in New York, some critics accused Martin of inflating an irrelevant incident that may have been shocking — “a glimpse of stocking” — in a previous era, but is minor to the point of tedium today. Along came Janet Jackson at the Super Bowl, giving us the scandal of “Nipplegate.” A glimpse of a female breast, exposed “accidentally” or not during a national event, ignited a political firestorm — just like *The Underpants*.

“At least with Jackson, there was talent involved. Today you can become famous for photographing yourself having sex,” Martin adds, but this was hardly true a mere four years ago when Classic Stage's Edelstein initially proposed *The Underpants* to Martin. Have the times caught up with Martin's vision until he's neither wild nor crazy but a comic realist holding a mirror up to our notoriety-obsessed society?

Whatever he may be, Steve Martin is definitely famous. Even in the chic Peninsula lobby crowded with Hollywood insiders, industry professionals pause to stare at Martin as he rises to leave for his next meeting. He puts on his sunglasses, his baseball hat, and you can't help it. You just have to ask: “Is fame a burden for you, Mr. Martin?”

He considers the question, then answers honestly and directly: “Depends on your mood. The benefits of fame are really fantastic, I must say. You have a right to complain, of course, but...” He smiles at a secret anecdote, then laughs. “You have a right to complain — privately.”

Stayton, Richard, “Exposing more than 'Underpants'; Steve Martin turns an obscure 1911 German play into a relevant examination of momentary fame in modern America.” *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2004



GLOSSARY



Terms are listed in order they appear in the script.

TALER Sometimes written as “thaler;” a silver coin used in Germany until the creation of the German Mark in 1870. At that time, one taler would have been worth about 3 German Marks, or about 75 US cents. The word “dollar” is an adaptation of the word “taler.”

REVERIES A state of abstracted musing; daydreaming

FIASCO Ludicrous and complete failure; disaster

UTILITARIAN Having a useful function

ABIDE In this context (“The King cannot abide scandal”), to tolerate

ACRIMONY (stage direction) Bitterness; a rough and bitter manner

NETHERWORLD The world of the dead. Used here as an ironic reference to that area from Louise’s waist and down

ALLUSION Passing reference or indirect mention

HOD CARRIER A laborer who carries supplies to masons or bricklayers

MERCURY In Roman mythology, the god that served as messenger to the other gods and was himself the god of commerce, travel, and thievery

ELLIPSIS The omission of a word or phrase necessary for a complete syntactical construction but not necessary for understanding. Indicated by three periods (. . .)

CLYDESDALE Heavy feathered-legged breed of draft horse originally from Scotland

TITAN Colossus; a person of exceptional importance and reputation; in Greek Mythology, one of a family of giants, the children of Uranus and Gaea, who sought to rule heaven and were overthrown and supplanted by the family of Zeus.

BARON A nobleman

BOURGEOIS A person belonging to the middle class; a person whose attitudes and behavior are marked by conformity to the standards and conventions of the middle class; in Marxist theory, a member of the property-owning class; a capitalist

CORPUSCLES An unattached body cell, such as a blood or lymph cell

FRAU A German courtesy title or form of address for an adult woman

FOP One whose ambition is to gain admiration by showy dress

DON JUAN A legendary Spanish nobleman and philanderer who became the hero of many poems, plays and operas; any successful womanizer



SOTTO VOCE Italian, meaning literally, “under the voice,” usually an indication to a musician to sing or play not just softly, but gently

WARP AND WEFT When weaving, thread works in two directions simultaneously, horizontally and vertically. “Warp” is the threads that run lengthwise in a woven fabric, crossed at right angles to the horizontal threads, or the “Weft”.

PROPHYLACTIC A preventative; in common language, a term used for condoms

SAPPHO The Greek lyric poet of Lesbos, from which comes the term “lesbian”

SYCOPHANT A servile self-seeker who attempts to win favor by flattering influential people

PLACEBO An inactive pill, liquid, or powder that has no treatment value.

AMORE Italian for “love”

EUPHEMISM The act or an example of substituting a mild, indirect, or vague term for one considered harsh, blunt, or offensive

SALACIOUS Appealing to or stimulating sexual desire; lascivious; lustful; bawdy

INNUENDO Insinuation; an indirect implication

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES



The following questions are geared toward a post-performance discussion of the Portland Center Stage production of *The Underpants*.

- 1 What most impressed you about the design of the show: set, costumes, lights, music, sound, images? What was particularly imaginative about these elements? What caught your attention? How do you think specific design choices contributed to themes in the play?
- 2 How did the actors' performance shape your understanding of the play? Pick one character in the play and discuss how you might have played the role if you were cast in the play. Pick one actor in the play and try to articulate what you liked about the way they approached their character.
- 3 The plot of the play centers around a wardrobe malfunction. Can you think of any modern day wardrobe malfunctions or "exposures"? Discuss their significance in today's society. Discuss how and why these events receive so much attention both in the play and in our modern media.
- 4 Think of a play you like that was written prior to 1950. How would you adapt the play to present day? What design choices would change? Are there themes in the play that would resonate with an audience today? How would you illuminate today's issues with your adaptation?



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