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Few plays have generated more controversy or had a more extraordinary performance history than Molière's *Don Juan*. David Whitton's study examines ways in which this enigmatic masterpiece has been interpreted in performance through the vision of different directors and in a variety of cultural and social contexts ranging from pre-revolutionary St Petersburg to post-revolutionary Prague. In a series of critical studies, key productions are re-constructed using prompt books, production notes, photographs, contemporary reviews, memoirs and the author's own experience as a spectator. Among the interpretations discussed are those of Meyerhold and Brecht, Bergman, Jouvet and Chéreau. Each of these productions, in addition to shedding new light on a familiar text, is a theatrical landmark in its own right.

The book is illustrated with numerous photographs and contains a geographical–chronological table of productions.

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DAVID WHITTON
Lancaster University



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GENERAL PREFACE

Volumes in the series *Plays in Production* will take major dramatic texts and examine their transposition, firstly onto the stage and, secondly, where appropriate, into other media. Each book will include concise but informed studies of individual dramatic texts, focusing on the original theatrical and historical context of a play in relation to its initial performance and reception followed by subsequent major interpretations on stage, both under the impact of changing social, political and cultural values, and in response to developments in the theatre generally.

Many of the plays will also have been transposed into other media – film, opera, television, ballet – which may well be the form in which they are first encountered by a contemporary audience. Thus, a substantial study of the play text and the issues it raises for theatrical realisation will be supplemented by an assessment of such adaptations as well as the production history, where the emphasis will be on the development of a performance tradition for each work, including staging and acting styles, rather than simply the archaeological reconstruction of past performances.

Plays included in the series are all likely to receive regular performance and individual volumes will be of interest to the informed reader as well as to students of theatre history and literature. Each book also contains an annotated production chronology as well as numerous photographs from key performances.

Michael Robinson
University of East Anglia

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PREFACE

Few plays can have generated more controversy or had a more extraordinary performance history than Molière's *Don Juan*. After a sensational première in 1665 the play ran into religious opposition almost immediately and was withdrawn – or banned? – after fifteen performances, never to be performed again in the author's lifetime. For the next one hundred and seventy-six years it was known in France only in Thomas Corneille's bowdlerised verse adaptation. Sporadic revivals during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did little to correct the play's reputation as an aberrant, if not downright unplayable, text. In fact, it was not until Louis Jouvet's masterly production in 1947 that *Don Juan* was elevated to its rightful place as a central work of the classical repertoire. In recent decades there has hardly been a single French director of note who has not offered his or her *Don Juan*. Elsewhere in Europe, meanwhile, it has inspired theatre practitioners as diverse as Meyerhold, Besson, Bergman and Grossman to some of their greatest directorial achievements.

All these directors have brought their own vision and methods to bear on a text which is acknowledged to be one of the most unorthodox and ambiguous works of the repertoire. The result of their experiments has been to reveal the play in a startling variety of guises, from the comic to the tragic, and in a range of perspectives from Christian to atheist and from absurdist to Marxist. The one thing they have all shared is a belief in its actuality, a conviction that Molière's three-centuries-old play had something relevant to say to the audiences of their time. My purpose in this study, therefore, is to examine ways in which Molière's text has been mediated in

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performance through the vision of different practitioners, and to enquire what those performances might have meant to their spectators. Key productions have been reconstructed using the familiar source materials of theatre historiography: prompt books and production notes, photographs, contemporary reviews, memoirs, reminiscences and, for a number of more recent productions, my own experiences as spectator. The book consists mostly of a series of individual production studies. Collectively, they recount the theatrical life of a play which has enjoyed a remarkable stage presence.

The production history of a single play is also, in a sense, a history of theatre itself and indirectly of the society in which theatre arises. The successive faces assumed by a major work of the repertoire reflect the changing theatrical priorities and broader cultural preoccupations of the time. With this in mind, I have aimed to offer a selection of productions which represent important phases in the development of the modern stage from modernism to postmodernism. The Don Juan legend is a global phenomenon, and it would undoubtedly have been interesting to trace its wider reverberations in the theatre of, say, Africa or America. But to extend the coverage to other continents and other languages would have weakened the contextual focus. For that reason I have chosen to restrict my study to major European theatres. Within those parameters, the choices were largely self-selecting. Each of the productions discussed here, as well as shedding new light on a familiar text, is a theatrical landmark in its own right.

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