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A Very Airy 'Tartuffe' at Theatricum Botanicum

By [Farley Elliott](#)



Elmire and Tartuffe. Photo courtesy Miriam Geer.

'Tartuffe', the 17th century French comedy by noted playwright Molière, can certainly be a bit heavy-handed at times. Written largely as a critical piece against the then-current Louis XIV administration (oh, how time flies), the play tackles themes of religious piety, virtuous behavior, and out and out sexuality - all in a few thousand rhyming couplets. Of course, the writing is a superb reflection of the times, yet something may be lost in the translation to today's more modern, media-consuming culture. Great substance, but in the overgrown steel edifices of some downtown proscenium theater, there's not a lot of context.

So why not take the play out of the city? The **Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum**, a professional theater hotspot tucked into a hillside halfway to Malibu along Topanga Canyon, is just what the doctor (or, in this case, the lustful priest) ordered. The Botanicum space is expansive, with hillside walkways, cultivated gardens and plenty of picnic room in front of the concession stand. Beyond that, the gently sloping walk gives rise to a wide wooden stage and a two-level playhouse sitting squarely stage left. Seating pushes up and away from the stage in a series of benches and bleachers before giving in to the woodland beyond the lights.

This, here, with the chandelier dangling from the wise old tree at the back of the stage, is where 'Tartuffe' belongs. [Aaron Hendry](#), the title priest himself, has the space to thrash himself about the stage as he tries to defraud Orgon of his wife, wealth and sanity. Ted Barton - as naïve and

impatient Orgon - has only the hills to shout back at him while he spends most of the show angry and cranked up well past '11'. [Willow Geer](#), the biting but moralistic housemaid with all the sassy answers, needs only to throw a wink through the open air for the audience to practically fall out of their padded seats. The space, as open as it is, lets the whole production breathe and simply play. Characters enter and exit in all manner, using corners and pathways that help blend the landscape into the show. And, while the Theatricum Botanicum may not be the palatial estate Moliere had in mind for Orgon when writing Tartuffe, this canyon theatrical escape has lost nothing in the production itself.

Despite the play's adaptations by director Ellen Geer, including a number of new songs, this Tartuffe is not really breaking new ground for the piece itself. Those players mentioned above are more than adequate, and a surprising turn by Jackson Thompson as Valere helps to elevate the work, but they rarely hand out Tonys on this side of town, and never this far off the 101. Yet, when combined with the Theatricum Botanicum, Tartuffe, the players, the directing and the night sky all shine a little brighter. As a cheeky twist, each night will crown a new audience member as the King himself, who will get to preside over Moliere's masterpiece... which is great, because this production is fit for one.

'Tartuffe' by Moliere runs select Saturdays and Sundays through October at the [Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum](#)