



THE ILLUSION

BY PIERRE CORNEILLE

FREELY ADAPTED BY TONY KUSHNER

Directed by Charles Newell

March 11 – April 11, 2010

at Court Theatre

-STUDY GUIDE-

ABOUT THE PLAY

CHARACTERS

- Pridamant of Avignon, a lawyer
- The Amanuensis, servant to Alcandre (also Geronte)
- Alcandre, a magician
- Calisto/Clindor/Theogenes, son of Pridamant
- Melibea/Isabelle/Hippolyta, beloved/wife of Calisto/Clindor/Theogenes
- Elicia/Lyse/Clarina, maid/friend of Melibea/Isabelle/Hippolyta
- Pleribo/Adraste/Prince Florilame, rival of Calisto/Clindor/Theogenes
- Matamore, a lunatic



STORY

The Illusion, “freely adapted” by Tony Kushner from French-Baroque playwright Pierre Corneille’s *L’Illusion comique*, follows Pridamant, a lawyer, as he searches for the son (Clindor) he banished 15 years earlier. At the opening of the play, Pridamant’s friend Dorante takes him to the cave of Alcandre, a mysterious yet powerful magician who claims he can conjure the image of Pridamant’s son. Throughout the play, Alcandre presents three different versions (or illusions) of Clindor’s life, all featuring the same two women and three men, but each referring to them by different names and depicting them in different locations; although Pridamant recognizes his son in all three visions, Clindor is never referred to by his real name. As the conjured images become more and more sinister, so Pridamant becomes increasingly anxious to rescue his son from what appears to be certain peril. In the end, much of what Pridamant sees turns out in fact to be an illusion, but the journey he has been on is nevertheless incredibly real.

The Seventeenth Century in Europe

✧ A transitional period, both the “Age of Reason” in philosophy and the height of the Baroque in art

✧ The 17th Century was the time of the Reformation, the European Christian reform movement that established Protestantism as a constituent branch of contemporary Christianity, which was met with the still-formidable Catholic Church’s Counter-Reformation.

✧ Christianity itself was met with an increased interest in reason, science, and secularized philosophy.

✧ The Hapsburg Empire still controlled the majority of Europe, but it was slowly on the decline, while France and then England steadily increased in power.

✧ For France, the 17th century was a kind of golden age before the excesses of Versailles reached untenable heights.

✧ At this time, French was not considered a language of intellectual and artistic discourse. The Académie française worked to change this by first standardizing the language, then producing canonical French literature.

✧ In theater, the unities of time, place, and action set forth by Aristotle were taken to ever more stringent lengths. Purity of form, verisimilitude, and decorum were of the utmost importance.

✧ Having just suffered the blow of the Reformation, the Catholic Church was on the offensive. Faced with the austerity of Lutheran and Calvinist theologies, the Church struck back with grandeur and beauty.

✧ Theater, long disparaged as a breeding ground for passion and sin, was now considered a tool for conversion. The Church still excommunicated actors and forbade them from being buried in sacred ground, but it supported professional theater as a means of both gaining converts and as a part of the Jesuit ideal of a humanist education. The Church understood the importance of beauty in trying to convert followers and combat the encroachment of Protestantism.

✧ In visual art, the Baroque proved a complicated fusion of religion, mysticism, and science—the Age of Reason in constant struggle with the Counter-Reformation.

✧ Pascal, Descartes, Hobbes, and Locke were all writing and sharing discourse. Philosophy, mathematics, metaphysics, ethics, logic, and the physical sciences were codified, hypothesized, and written about. The philosophers of the age were still somewhat confined by the Church, but the seeds were sown for the increasingly secular humanist views of the Age of Enlightenment.



THEATRE OF THE BAROQUE

Art of the Baroque Period (1600–1750 roughly) in Europe is distinguished by an elaborate, ornate style which, although carefully arranged, ultimately resists order by seeking out the excessive, the grotesque, or the dreamily representational. This applies not merely to the period's visual art, which is often formally complex and engrossing and is best exemplified by the lush paintings of Reubens and the intense, erotic statues of Bernini, but to other arts of the period as well, and theater in particular. Originating in late Renaissance Italy and spreading through Europe as it developed, Baroque theater engaged the tensions between order and chaos and between reality and illusion by depicting fantastical, martial, or farcical plots undercut with themes of duty, deception, and passion.

The tension between reality and illusion was a particular concern for Baroque playwrights. Many plays of the period—for instance Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Corneille's *L'Illusion comique*—explore the intersections of dreams and real life, presenting high fantasy contrasted with the comfortably-ordered realities of daily life. Even plays without fantasy elements challenge the audience's understanding of reality, as in Molière's *The Rehearsal at Versailles*, which depicts Molière himself and his acting company attempting to rehearse a play. These plays call into question the truthfulness of real life and the individual's ability to separate fact from fiction, and the playwrights of the period experimented with different ways of dramatizing these questions, perhaps the chief preoccupation of the artists and philosophers of post-Renaissance Europe.

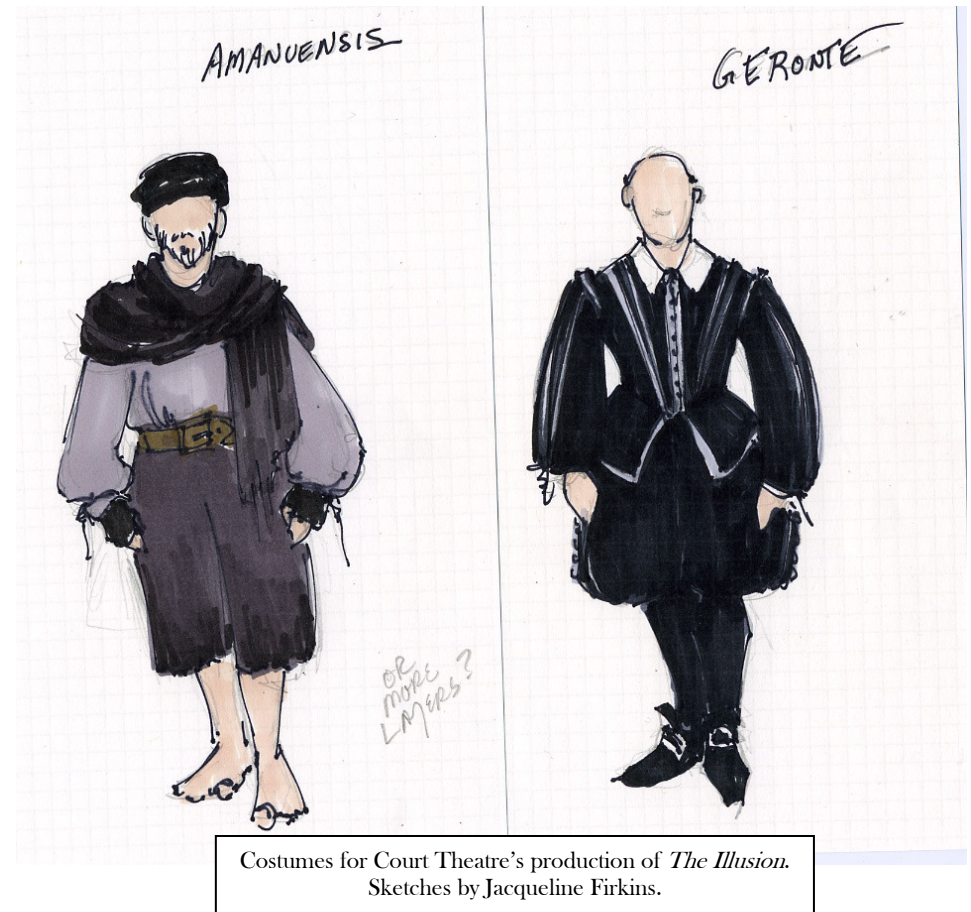
In seventeenth century France, however, these experiments were complicated by a certain need for order, showing itself in the form of dramatic theory and criticism. With the Renaissance rediscovery of the Greek and Roman classics, Aristotle's *Poetics*—with modern interpretation and interpolation—had taken hold as the guiding principles for dramatic structure. Plays were expected to fit into Aristotle's definitions of either comedy or tragedy, and to observe unity of time and place. For example, plays were expected to take place over the course of a day with each act in real time, and occur in the same. Although playwrights like Corneille explored the limits of these rules, blending and bending the rules of comedy and tragedy to create new, expansive genres, or setting aside aspects of the unities in order to tell a broader story, there was a certain amount of pressure during the seventeenth century to adhere to the restrictions.



Much of the pressure to conform came from the newly-founded French Academy, which as of the 1630's was attempting not only to standardize the French language but to create a national literature as well. Growing out of an informal salon setting, the Academy was officially founded in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu, who was King Louis XII's chief adviser, and dedicated itself to "labor with all the care and diligence possible, to give exact rules to [the] language, to render it capable of treating the arts and sciences." Organized to regulate both language and art, as a state-created entity, it held a controlling power over cultural expression. Richelieu in fact commissioned a sort of textbook outlining appropriate dramatic theory; written in 1640 by the Abbe d'Aubingnac, *L'pratique du theatre* provides reflections on the unities, the question of representation and truth, dramatic structure, and spectacle.



Costumes for Court Theatre's production of *The Illusion*.
Sketches by Jacqueline Firkins.



Costumes for Court Theatre's production of *The Illusion*.
Sketches by Jacqueline Firkins.

Corneille himself notably ran afoul of the Academy with his play *Le Cid*, which he had subtitled a 'tragicomedy' and which disregarded the classical unities. The play fell under a storm of criticism, coming mostly from the Academy. Richelieu himself ordered an analysis, and it was determined that not only had Corneille broken theatrical rules, but had written an immoral play. Ashamed of the criticism, Corneille's plays began to tend more towards classical unity, and the French drama began to cement itself within these boundaries, but the Baroque questions of reality and illusion remained.

Production history of Pierre Corneille's *L'Illusion comique*

1636 – Corneille's *L'Illusion comique* is first performed in Paris at the Théâtre du Marais. The premiere was a success and the play was still in performance in 1660, by which time Corneille's other early comedies were considered dated.

1684 – Corneille dies; the popularity of *L'Illusion comique* wanes.

1861 – COMÉDIE-FRANÇAISE, EDOUARD THIERRY.

This production was in honor of the 250th anniversary of Corneille's birth. Thierry found Corneille's framing device original and intriguing, but was less interested by the illusion scenes and thought that the romance contained within them was badly dated in light of nineteenth-century standards. He abridged these scenes greatly, especially the monologues, and removed the prison scene entirely.

1895 – THÉÂTRE DE L'ODÉON, ANDRÉ ANTOINE.

Antoine went further than Thierry in revising the text, apparently removing the illusion of Act Five outright. His relatively realist direction was criticized at the time for failing to capture the "phantasmagoria [and] enchanting unreality" of the text.

1926 – LES COPIAUS, JACQUES COPEAU.

Copeau's theatre collective performed a show entitled *L'Illusion* during their time in Switzerland. The piece was part of their effort to find the roots of comic performance and create a 'new *commedia*,' complete (perhaps paradoxically) with novel stock characters of their own devising. The play was not Corneille's, but used a similar premise: a son runs away from his overbearing father to become an actor, the father sees the son perform and confuses fiction and reality, and a reconciliation results. The piece was performed in mask, and the company that the son joins resembled the Copiaus themselves, working on improvised comedy.



Christian Bérard's rendering of a literal cave for Louis Jouvet's 1937 production of *L'Illusion comique* at the Comédie Française.

1937 – COMÉDIE-FRANÇAISE, LOUIS JOUVET.

This production was also commissioned to commemorate an anniversary: perhaps strangely, the 300th anniversary of Corneille's most famous work, *Le Cid*. Jouvet had worked extensively with Copeau, but was not a member of the Copiaus. The production had a dark but fanciful design, with "a huge grotto draped with black curtains, looking, in semi-darkness, much like a monstrous mouth." Fantastical set-pieces would rise or fall to the stage, a grotesque ballet was added, and the prison became an enormous bird cage. Combined with colorful costumes amidst the gloomy design, the overall effect was "a strange nightmarish quality." Out of respect for the author, the cast brought out a bust of Corneille during the lengthy ovation on opening night.

1985 – THÉÂTRE DE L'EUROPE, GIORGIO STREHLER.

That Strehler chose *L'Illusion comique* as his inaugural production with the Théâtre de l'Europe speaks volumes about the play's entry into the French theatrical canon following Juvet's triumphant revival. Strehler focused in particular on the romantic and sexual aspects of the play: Clindor was a romantic rebel against bourgeois conformity who at times displayed a "raw, cynical, almost satanic" sexuality; Matamore's sword seemed "in a constant state of erection" and began to shoot out sparks whenever he would pretend to draw it.

2004 – Corneille's *L'Illusion comique* is still performed regularly in France. Among recent productions, a 2004 staging at Gennevilliers outside Paris featured a rear-projection cyclorama that actors had to cross behind in order to enter the playing space, casting their shadows on the screen; Matamore was clothed in a tutu and swung on a trapeze; and Alcandre was played by leading French theatre theorist Françoise Renault. This heightened the metatheatricality of the production, placing an actual figure of knowledge regarding theatrical artifice on the stage to control the illusions.

2010 – A Comédie-Française production directed by Galin Stoev is being performed beginning on March 2, 2010, in the Salle Richelieu, where the Thierry and Juvet productions both took place. The production features an ultra minimalist set likened by one unimpressed critic to the filthy walls of the entrance to a disused swimming pool.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TONY KUSHNER'S ADAPTATION OF PIERRE CORNEILLE'S *THE ILLUSION*

Tony Kushner's adaptation of Corneille's *L'Illusion comique* was performed as a reading at the **New York Theater Workshop** in **1988** and premiered at the **Hartford Stage Company** in **1989**. It has since been popular in theatres across the country, and gained international notice following Kushner's rise to fame with the success of *Angels in America* in **1993-94**.

The **New York Theater Workshop performance** took place in front of a set consisting of **perspective drawings of classical pillars**. This can be read as a comment on illusion—a sort of visual pun playing on the use of forced perspective in stage design that pithily suggests theatrical distortion. But the design choice also contains **a statement on the mode of adaptation used in the work itself**, insofar as Kushner makes a classic play present on stage in a mediated form—he is working, the stage suggests, from Corneille's design if not always from his realization of that design.

Legend has it that **the Hartford production was more overtly haunted by Corneille**. As Sylviane Gold describes in the *New York Times*, the production was **beset by technical difficulties** until Kushner and director Mark Lamos decided to **reprint the program to say not "The Illusion by Tony Kushner, based on a play by Pierre Corneille" but "The Illusion by Pierre Corneille, freely adapted by Tony Kushner."** All the technical glitches stopped on cue, save for one: **Kushner's name was mysteriously wiped from the marquee on the night before the show opened**. The play continues to be performed and published under this revised heading, lest the original author return to seek his due.

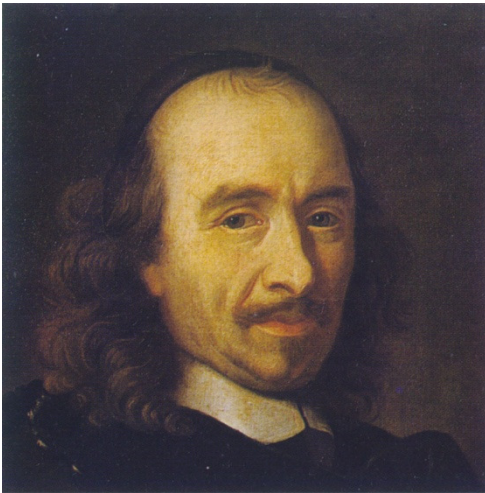
In a production by the **Dallas Theater Center** in **2006**, the play was performed in front of a **backdrop of enlarged black-and-white photographs**—a set that simultaneously evoked antiquity (black-and-white photographs in a hypertechnological era) and novelty (photographs appearing at all in a production of a seventeenth-century play).

In **Chapel Hill** in **2007**, a production by the **Playmakers Repertory Company** changed moods drastically over the course of the three illusions. The **first illusion** featured **warm romantic light and full flowing period costumes**; by the **third illusion**, with **all color drained from the staging, wind and rain effects battered the actors**, who performed in costumes described as the “cold skeletons” that remain once decorations are stripped away—umbrellas made only of the metal frames, hoop skirts made of only the hoops.

A similar concept was used in **another 2007 production**, a version of the play **in Spanish** that notably **chose to work from Kushner’s text, not Corneille’s**. In ***La Ilusión***, each illusion was played in a different theatrical style: the first as a **commercial musical**, the second as a **formal baroque drama**, and the third as a **restrained tragedy in modern dress**. Felicia Londré argues that Kushner’s version of the play “has transcended its sources” to become an important work in its own right, much as Corneille’s play did in its own time. This is neatly illustrated by the performance of Kushner’s *Illusion* in Spain, a country whose theatre in the seventeenth century had greatly influenced Corneille himself.



Scale model of the set for Court Theatre’s production of *The Illusion*, looking towards the stage from house right



The Life of Pierre Corneille

by Drew Dir, Court Theatre Resident Dramaturg

Pierre Corneille was born in 1606 in Rouen, France to a well-off, middle-class family. At the time, Rouen was the capital of theater publishing in France, and Corneille probably saw many traveling productions (such as, according to speculation, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) when they passed through Rouen. Corneille's father and grandfather, however, were both lawyers, members of the rising French bourgeoisie, and a career in law seemed to be expected of the young Corneille. At the age of nine, he entered the Jesuit school of Rouen, where he received an education of Renaissance humanism, classics (especially Latin), rhetoric, and Catholic doctrine. Unlike his younger contemporary, the playwright Jean Racine, who was educated by the heretical Jansenists and was influenced by their emphasis on original sin and predestination, the Jesuits instilled in Corneille an optimistic belief in free will. This belief in a rational, capable man who is master of his fate would later influence the philosophy of Corneille's heroic tragedies like *Le Cid*.

In 1624, Corneille passed his bar examinations, but he performed so poorly on his first case that he gave up the profession in favor of a magisterial position arranged by his parents. He began writing, and in 1629 showed his first play, *Mélite*, to a theater troupe that happened to be passing through Rouen. The company took it to Paris, where it became a minor success and launched Corneille's literary career. The company became known as the Théâtre du Marais, and for the next few decades Corneille wrote his plays almost exclusively for this theater. Some of Corneille's plays are believed to reflect the composition of the acting ensemble—for example, the unusually large number of female actors in the company resulted in more female roles in Corneille's plays.

Corneille tried his hand at numerous genres, including heroic tragedy, a genre largely of his own invention. He called his *L'Illusion comique* (1636) a "strange monster," a hybrid work composed of comedy, tragedy, and pastoral. Corneille's most successful work, *Le Cid* (1636), about a conflict between heroic love and heroic duty, was a runaway hit with Parisian audiences and a lightning rod for critics. Despite being denounced by the French Academy, the play was so popular that people began using the phrase "beau comme *Le Cid*" [beautiful like *Le Cid*]. As for Corneille, he was fiercely defensive of his work. Early in his career, he famously quit the "Five Authors," a company of playwrights who wrote plays based on topics suggested by Cardinal Richelieu. Known for his vainglorious but independent spirit, he was kept out of the French Academy for years because of his refusal to move to Paris.

Corneille continued to write plays—mostly tragedies, but also some religious and machine, or spectacle, plays—until late in life, even as the theater became more enamored with his younger rival, Jean Racine. A complete revised edition of his works was published in 1684, the year he died. After his death, Racine spoke these words about his competitor:

"You know in what condition was the French stage when he began his work. Such disorder! Such irregularity! No taste, no knowledge of the real beauties of the theater... In this chaos, [...Corneille] against the bad taste of the century,... inspired by an extraordinary genius,... put reason on stage, but a reason accompanied by all the pomp and all the ornaments of which our language is capable; happily uniting verisimilitude and the marvelous, he left far behind him all the rivals... who tried in vain, through their discourses and frivolous criticism, to lower a merit that they could not equal."

About Tony Kushner

In “After Angels,” a profile of Tony Kushner published in *The New Yorker*, John Lahr wrote: “[Kushner] is fond of quoting Melville’s heroic prayer from *Mardi and Voyage Thither* (“Better to sink in boundless deeps than float on vulgar shoals”), and takes an almost carnal glee in tackling the most difficult subjects in contemporary history – among them, AIDS and the conservative counter-revolution (*Angels In America*), Afghanistan and the West (*Homebody/Kabul*), German Fascism and Reaganism (*A Bright Room Called Day*), the rise of capitalism (*Hydriotaphia, or the Death of Dr. Browne*), and racism and the civil rights movement in the South (*Caroline, or Change*). But his plays, which are invariably political, are rarely polemical. Instead Kushner rejects ideology in favor of what he calls “a dialectically shaped truth,” which must be “outrageously funny” and “absolutely agonizing,” and must “move us forward.” He gives voice to characters who have been rendered powerless by the forces of circumstances – a drag queen dying of AIDS, an uneducated Southern maid, contemporary Afghans – and his attempt to see all sides of their predicament has a sly subversiveness. He forces the audience to identify with the marginalized – a humanizing act of the imagination.”



Tony Kushner (Photo by Joan Marcus)

Born in New York City in 1956, and raised in Lake Charles, Louisiana, Kushner is best known for his two-part epic, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. His other plays include *A Bright Room Called Day*, *Slavs!*, *Hydrotaphia*, *Homebody/Kabul*, and *Caroline, or Change*, the musical for which he wrote book and lyrics, with music by composer Jeanine Tesori. Kushner has translated and adapted Pierre Corneille's *The Illusion*, S.Y. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Sezuan* and *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and the English-language libretto for the children's opera *Brundibár* by Hans Krasa. He wrote the screenplays for Mike Nichols' film of *Angels In America*, and Steven Spielberg's *Munich*. His books include *But the Giraffe: A Curtain Raising* and *Brundibar: the Libretto*, with illustrations by Maurice Sendak; *The Art of Maurice Sendak: 1980 to the Present*; and *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict*, co-edited with Alisa Solomon. His latest work includes a collection of one-act plays, entitled *Tiny Kushner* – featuring characters such as Laura Bush, Nixon's analyst, the queen of Albania and a number of tax evaders – (Fall 2009), and *The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism & Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures* (which premiered at the Guthrie Theatre in May 2009 and is scheduled for a New York production). During the 2010-2011 season, a revival of *Angels in America* will run off-Broadway at the Signature Theater in New York.

Kushner is the recipient of a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, an Emmy Award, two Tony Awards, three Obie Awards, an Oscar nomination, an Arts Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the PEN/Laura Pels Award for a Mid-Career Playwright, a Spirit of Justice Award from the Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, and a Cultural Achievement Award from The National Foundation for Jewish Culture, among many others. *Caroline, or Change*, produced in the autumn of 2006 at the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain, received the Evening Standard Award, the London Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Olivier Award for Best Musical. He was also awarded the 2009 *Chicago Tribune* Literary Prize for lifetime achievement. He is the subject of a documentary film, *Wrestling with Angels: Playwright Tony Kushner*, made by the Oscar-winning filmmaker Freida Lee Mock. He lives in Manhattan with his husband, Mark Harris.

DISCUSSION & FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

1. *The Illusion* makes use of ‘meta-theatre’ (play-within-a-play). What other examples of meta-theatre (or metafilm) can you think of, and what do they symbolize? What might the purpose of meta-theatre be?
2. Throughout the play, the same actors will play different characters. What do you think this means in terms of the story’s thematic message?
3. The set for Court Theatre’s production of *The Illusion* will feature various pieces of ‘Baroque theatrical machinery’ (visible gears and levers reminiscent of machinery during the Baroque period). What do you think this signifies about the underlying message of the play as a whole?
4. By the end of *The Illusion*, Pridamant is surprised to discover that he is mistaken about a number of things he thought were true. Was there a time in your life when you were surprised to find out you’d been mistaken about something you were sure was true? How did you come to terms with the truth?
5. The idea that “life is theatre” became popular during the Baroque period. How do you think this informs *The Illusion*? What kind of statement about theatre and life do you think Corneille and Kushner are making with this work?