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Family Plays

The Medicine Show

or

How to Succeed In Medicine Without Really Trying

By

Virginia Glasgow Koste



The Medicine Show

or

How to Succeed In Medicine Without Really Trying

“It was DYNAMITE because I like laughter.”
—wrote a 10-year-old audience member.

Comedy. By Virginia Glasgow Koste. An American version of Molière’s Le Médecin Malgré Lui. Cast: 3m., 3w., 1 either gender with doubling, or up to 9 (3m., 3w., 3 either gender). The Medicine Show is a short and swift play all about a fabulous (and hilarious) fake attuned to the chances of chance. This play is a new, contemporary comedy and a zany favorite wherever it is produced. It is ideal for easy touring and freely derived from Molière, although a truly American version for young and family audiences. The world’s most famous, infamous, paramedical clown is involved in a scheming and plotting. He psyches out everybody in sight, falling back on his intuitive wits, and landing happily on his feet of clay. This version has a winning prescription that laughter is the best medicine! No set. Approximate running time: 25 to 30 minutes. Code: MJ5.

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www.FamilyPlays.com

ISBN-13 978-0-87602-258-0



The Medicine Show

The Medicine Show
or
How to Succeed in Medicine
Without Really Trying

An American version of Molière's
LE MEDICIN MALGRE LUI By
VIRGINIA GLASGOW KOSTE

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311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098

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ANCHORAGE PRESS, INC.

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(THE MEDICINE SHOW
OR HOW TO SUCCEED IN MEDICINE WITHOUT TRYING)

ISBN: 978-0-87602-258-0

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“Produced by special arrangement with
Family Plays of Woodstock, Illinois”

THE MEDICINE SHOW OR HOW TO SUCCEED IN MEDICINE WITHOUT REALLY TRYING

—a new now farce by Virginia Glasgow Koste, freely and Frenchly derived from Moliere's zesty comedy (more commonly called **The Doctor In Spite of Himself**, originally **Le Medicin Malgre Lui**) about a fabulous phony attuned to the chances of Chance. As plotting as plotted against, literature's most famous paramedical clown psychs out everybody in sight, falling back on his native intuition and wit and landing happily on his feet of clay.

Production Notes

The original title of this script was HOW TO SUCCEED IN MEDICINE WITHOUT REALLY TRYING, because I thought that did convey Moliere's essence—that authentic courage, grace, and genius which he needed in order to write **The Imaginary Invalid** (a comedy about a hypochondriac), act the lead in it, and die shortly after exiting. **That** is savoir-faire! To live improvisationally, to accept and use whatever destiny presents—even lingering, fatal illness—with style and gusto, laughing at and with the fallible world as you go along—that is the magnificent gift of Moliere as I see it. That is the gift we all wanted to give away, over and over again, to people who, if you had asked them whether they were in the mood for a classic French masterpiece, might not all have said yes. We wanted them to say yes before they even knew that put-off, put-on question . . . to find themselves joyously in love with great literature and the live theatre without even trying.

Another reason for that title: I wanted an American name for an American translation, without betraying Moliere.

What happened, naturally, in the course of the first October-through-April season that The Caravan Theatre of The Young (Eastern Michigan University) toured southeastern Michigan with this production, was that we lovingly and expediently renamed it **THE MEDICINE SHOW**.

What's apt about that is that our treatment of the play, our marvellous, motley band of gypsy players, turned out to have something in common with the medicine shows of American folk-life. We were very American, we were committed to the people's theatre (the young unwashed out in the everywhere, rather than the academic or elite, the secret or the senile theatre), and—in sickness or in health, through storm or icy dark of morning—we were stubbornly alive. We were setting up any place, to dispense magical medicine, a powerful cure-all for whatever ails you: re-creating, blessed, unifying, body-easing, mind-expanding laughter. (It was

DYNAMITE because I like laughter,” wrote one 10-year-old.)

A few notes about the hows—which naturally must derive from the whys, the whats, the whos and the wheres.

The company went in as **themselves** to each place where they played (in the full, deep sense of that word). That is, instead of doing the trendy thing of “acting” like actors—e.g., an Italian commedia troupe, which is in itself exotic and remote to American kids—they did the easier, harder, more obvious but still not common thing: went in as themselves—very individual students, age-ranging from 19 to 37, different in shape, temperament, background, foreground, but also bound in the kinship of The Medicine Show company and its mission of connecting with children and young people.

Wherever possible, they located the playing space and the audience on the same level, to help generate that kinship, to enjoy the kids to collaborate. The “production” was contained in two boxes (“I liked the idea of only two boxes for scenery,” wrote an 11-year-old), “dress-ups” layered over sweat pants and leotards (“I like the way you just put your costumes on without taking about an hour,” from a 10-year-old), and three carefully chosen props (including “sponge” and “mask”—Groucho-type).

Of course, none of these ideas are new. They’re **old**. But we made them ours; freshened, quickened them. The company as a whole evolved, as individuals and as an entity, and THE MEDICINE SHOW took on a life of its own that was at the same time true to the old “esprit” of its source and faithful to its own unique new ethos. Which grew from thousands of astonishing kids commingling thoughts and feelings with each other and the players and Moliere:

“Please come and make us laugh again.”

“I liked them so much that I will dream about it.”

“You startled me and a good play has to startle people. Otherwise they won’t even move.”

The “opening” process which evolved was to open ourselves, open our audience, open the show on the open stage. To make us a true group with a shared purpose and to begin saying hello, in the presence of the audience we did a simple but well prepared warm-up sequence to lively, funny, blood-stirring taped music. As the last of the kids were settling in (which we helped them to do), we started the music (which happily opened with trumpet blasts) and began our homemade ritual in the circle which transformed into our stage place. We began, each alone in the group, doing concentrated individual body and voice warm-ups, then quickly merged into group playing

(slow/fast tag, invisible ball and jumprope, limbo, tunnel, follow the leader). We wound **up** the warm-**up** with a huge circle which drew **up** to the center with the final build-**up** of the music. Then, breathless, relaxed, sweaty, having conjured up the spirit of play and invited everyone into the mood, we transformed into simple costumes as we introduced ourselves:

Hi! We're Eastern Michigan University's Caravan
Theatre of the Young,
and I'm Gary Carpenter . . .
(While in the process of
prop-setting
and dressing)

Cathy Kuhlman . . .
Fred Kuhlman . . .
Kathy Pingel . . .
Nick Peach . . .
Colleen Kelly . . .
George Taylor . . .
Glen Santiago!

STAGE MANAGER: (*Springing to box-top*) Today we're going to do a **comedy** for you, because we believe that **laughing** is the best medicine . . .

(The whole company interrupt with a crazy, contagious laughing game—including wild tickling—which builds, crests, threatens to break out of control, and is then abruptly cut by a signal from the S.M., who recovers to continue.)

STAGE MANAGER: . . . medicine, yes—and speaking of medicine, the long name of our show is . . .

First Player: HOW

Next Player: TO

Another: SUCCEED

And Another: IN

Another: MEDICINE

Another: WITHOUT

Still Another: REALLY

STAGE MANAGER: TRYING! The show was originally made up in the year . . .

ONE PLAYER: 1666!

S.M.: . . . by the great French comedian . . .

ANOTHER: Moliere!

S.M.: . . . in the faraway country of . . .

ANOTHER: (gutteral, flairy) Frawnce!

S.M.: . . . and so the original title of our play sounded something like this:

WHOEVER SPEAKS THE FRENCHIEST FRENCH: LE MEDECIN MALGRE LUI! (*Sudden explosion of entire company into exuberant, babbling French—some real, some ersatz—with spontaneous milling, inter-relating, talking—still in French—to individual audience members, who sometimes respond in various languages, actual or invented. During this melee Sganarelle leans low into an audience member and says, intimately but precisely: “Attendez! La femme est diabolique!” After a few seconds of this French street scene the company gradually leave Martine and Sganarelle centered, to segue into the play itself without any break between the initiation and “la piece.” Their word fight, keyed very high in violent “French,” fuses into American to “open” (all ways) the play. They are simultaneously improvising fighting words at each other, with, as in most quarrels, no listening going on. Important: NO physical fighting between these mates is used in this version. The first clear solo line comes with Sganarelle breaking away in disgust . . .*)

SGANARELLE: Oh, you ARE a pain in the (*Martine pushes him in the rear*) neck! (*To the same audience member that he has earlier addressed*) See? What did I tell you before? Aristotle was absolutely right to say, “Don’t ever get married, because a woman is a devil!” She’ll . . .

MARTINE: (*Pushing between Sganarelle and the person he’s addressing*) Will you listen to him? Quoting Aristotle . . . I bet he never even said that . . .

(Sganarelle has started to mimic her; Martine notices the people in the audience looking past her; she whirls to catch him, whereupon he abruptly quits his act, though not quite fast enough.)

MARTINE: You think you’re smart, don’t you?

SGANARELLE: (*Matter-of-fact, honest*) Yes, I do.

(*Martine turns her back on him in disgust and rage at losing another point; Sgan presses his advantage.*)

SGAN.: Find me another woodcutter that worked for a famous doctor for six years, and that learned to read without even going to school.

MART.: You ought to thank God you've got me—what did you ever do to deserve me for a wife?!

SGAN.: I don't know. I often wonder.

MART.: (*Further exasperated, pulls him around to face her.*) I don't have to take that from you—a man that eats everything in sight . . .

SGAN.: (*Indignant, righteous, hurt*) Now that's a lie. I **drink** part of it . . .

MART.: (*building*) . . . a man that never does a lick of work from morning till night . . .

SGAN.: That's to keep me from getting depressed!

MART.: —and what am I supposed to do with my family??

SGAN.: (*Happy-go-lucky, generous*) Up to you!

MARTINE: (*Shifting to pleading, piteously holding her palms out toward him*) I got four poor kids on my hands—

SGANARELLE: (*Slapping her palms, ghetto-greeting style, jollying her*) Put 'em down!

MART.: —who keep begging me (*she is by now enjoying her own pathos*) for something to eat . . .

SGAN.: (*Mock shock, disapproving*) That's rude. Spank them.

MART.: (*Flaming up again*) . . . a man that rips off and sells every stick of furniture in the place . . .

SGAN.: That's to make it easier when we move! (*He is delighted by his own wit.*)

MART.: (*Screaming*) HOW LONG HAVE I GOTTA PUT UP WITH THIS??

SGAN.: (*Maddeningly calm, school marmy*) You're yelling, my love.

MART.: (*Yelling*) I AM NOT YELLING!

SGAN.: Watch it now, Duck. (*He straight-arms her forehead as she flails her arms ineffectually.*) Calm down . . .

PASSING STRANGER: (*Enters during above line; engrossed in book as he walks. When he's well past Sgan. and Mart., he double takes.*) Hey, wait a minute! What is this? (*Retraces his steps to go to them.*) You bully, let go of that woman!

(*Sganarelle drops his arm in surprised reaction to this intrusion, which causes Martine to fall. She is instantly on the rebound, and darts between her husband and the stranger.*)

MART.: (*Cool, commanding*) Who you callin' a bully?

STRANGER: (*Caught off balance*) What?? Well, I mean, isn't he . . . wasn't . . .

MARTINE: (*Closing in on him, threatening, undertone*) What's it got to do with you?

STRANGER: Wha—NOTHING—nothing at all, I . . .

MART.: (*Backing him up*) Yeah, well then what're you buttin' in for?

STRANGER: Listen, it was my mistake—I—

MART.: (*Breaking away, directly to an audience member, confidentially*) Do you believe this? Breaking up a man and his wife?

STRANGER: (*Toward Sgan., who has been jubilantly enjoying the scene*) Listen, I'm sorry! I didn't know she was your **wife**, I—

MARTINE: What right have you got (*lifting him by the nose*) to stick your nose in?

STRANGER: (*Couldn't agree more*) No right—

MART.: (*Taking him by both ears*) Why don't you mind your own business, then?

STRANGER: (*Total assent, rescuing his ears*) I will—

MART.: (*Crunches his toe.*) This is a private affair.

STRANGER: (*Doubles down to comfort his toe.*) Right!

MART.: (*Pokes her finger into his belly.*) Does it hurt you? (*It does. She has by now backed him up to where Sgan. is still basking in the prideful glow of being so ably protected, and in the irony of the whole turn their quarrel has lately taken.*)

STRANGER: (*Backed up to Sgan., the Stranger twists to face him, conspiratorially*) Listen, I'm sorry—please, go ahead—you can yell out this woman all you want . . . (*turning on Mart.*) I'll even help you if you say the word—

SGAN.: (*Turning Stranger around, grabbing his shirt at the throat, quietly*) I don't say the word.

STRANGER: (*Confused and cowed, but still struggling for a last shred of dignity*) Oh, well then, that's different . . .

SGAN.: (*Ignoring him, feeling very much in command*) I'll yell her out if I want, and I won't yell her out if I **don't** want.

STRANGER: (*Nodding vigorously*) Good idea!

SGAN.: She's my wife, not yours.

STRANGER: (*In this proposition his agreement is heartfelt.*) Your wife, not mine—

SGAN.:—and you'd better learn not to mess around in other people's business! (*Mart., from behind Sganarelle's protective back, reaches over and shoves Stranger into his exit, which he is very grateful to make. Now Sgan. and Mart. have a golden moment of peaceful union, one against the outside world, as they watch after the vanquished intruder-samaritan. Sgan., triumphant, basking in bliss, turns fondly and confidently to Mart.*)

SGANARELLE: (*High and happy, ready to play, sings—from "Comedy Tonight":*) "Bring on the lovers, liars, and clowns—"

MART.: (*Breaking away and breaking in, whomps him back down to earth.*) NO.

SGAN.: (*Trying again, wheedling, tickles her.*) Come on—

MART.: (*Twists away from him, determined to act injured, and really miffed because she can't quite help laughing.*) NO! Big man.

SGAN.: Don't be like that—I was just fooling around before . . . (*tickling her again*)

MART.: (*Dignity, thy name is Woman.*) Leave me be, I said. I'm mad. (*Moves away and turns back with that formal announcement, which she can't properly bring off over her suppressed laughter. She seats herself in a The-Queen-Is-Not-Pleased way.*)

SGAN.: All right. (*This ritual has been gone through before, it seems. He kneels, flings out his arms.*) I'm sorry. (*He travels closer to her back, on his knees, somehow reminiscent of Groucho Marx.*)

MART.: (*Relenting, relishing*) Well . . . (*Turns her head, bumps into his kiss on the cheek, laughs in surprise.*) I forgive you . . .

SGAN.: (*Winner again*) Atta girl!

MART.: . . . THIS time. (*Leans over his back, confidentially to audience.*) But I'm gonna get even.

SGAN.: (*Picks her up, swings her around festively.*) There now, don't you feel better? I do! (*Plunks her down on her feet atop block.*) Well, just to show you I mean it—I'm off to WORK—and I'll cut up enough cords to buy a banquet! (*Exits, calling over his shoulder*) Get the wagon ready!

MART.: (*Charmed in spite of herself; he is fun and she does love him. Chuckling*) Oh, I'll fix your wagon! (*Steps down, moving restlessly around the stage, to herself*) I'm gonna find a way to get at that Aristotle-quoter. (*Mimicking him*) "Didn't I work for a great doctor for six years?" I'll give him some of his own medicine. (*On that line she has sat down to brood, chin in hand, concentrating, her back to the entrance of Lucas and his wife Jacqueline.*)

LUCAS: (*Enters, sits to take stone out of his shoe and rub sore foot during this dialogue.*) . . . a new medicine, he says! "Find me a great doctor," he says! What does he want of us?? A MIRACLE worker, he says! He's **had** every famous doctor in to see her already . . .

JACQUELINE: (*She has heard it all before; blotting her hot neck and forehead with her kerchief*) Well, it is his only daughter—you know the sun

rises and sets on her, as far as her father's concerned . . .

LUCAS: I know he's a bleeping hard man to work for—"Find me a MIRACLE worker," he says . . .

JACQ.: (*She has tuned out, thinking her own thoughts.*) Lucas, don't you think that's a kind of weird disease Lucinda's got?

LUCAS: Weird is right! —just sits there going (*and he does a comic, accurate imitation of the actress we are to meet in the next scene*) "a-e-i-o-oo"!

JACQ.: . . . so now the wedding has to be postponed . . .

LUCAS: (*Snappish*) Naturally! That old Elmer wouldn't want to take on a sick wife—a well one (*meaningfully, at Jacq.*) is headache enough. (*Cold look from his wife*) **He** wants one that'll take care of **him**.

JACQ.: (*Working it out as she talks*) . . . you know, my theory is she's taken with that Leandre—Lee, she calls him . . .

LUCAS: Are you crazy? Old Geronte wouldn't throw her away on that young nobody . . .

JACQ.: (*Forgetting herself, yearningly*) He sure is gorgeous . . .

LUCAS: (*Rising, shoe on again, with a reproving look at J.*) Anyway, right now we gotta find this miracle worker somewhere, remember? (*He nudges J. out of her reverie and back into action.*)

MARTINE: (*She has listened and is plainly plotting; she stages a collision with L. and J., who are predictably annoyed by being jostled.*) Oh, excuse me . . . I've just got so much on my mind . . .

JACQ.: (*Good-natured, she is immediately forgiving and chatty.*) I know what you mean! Everybody's got worries . . . Look at us . . .

LUCAS: (*Disgruntled*) . . . Yeah, we gotta find a MIRACLE worker, is all!

MARTINE: A miracle worker?

JACQUELINE: A doctor—

LUCAS: —for this strange disease . . .

MARTINE: What—

JACQ.: — She's struck dumb, see . . .

LUCAS: —just like that—

MART.: How—

JACQ.: —Can't say a word . . .

MART.: WHO?

LUCAS: Old Geronte— the man we work for—

MART.: Oh?

JACQ.: —It's his daughter, Lucinda—

MART.: Ah!

LUCAS: So we're supposed to find some genius doctor that can cure her . .

JACQ.: —and we don't even know where to **start** looking . . .

MART.: (*Portentiously*) Are you in luck!

LUCAS: What?

MART.: I know just the man—

JACQ.: You do?

MART.: A MIRACLE worker!

LUCAS: You mean it?

MART.: Do I mean it! (*Taking stage, enjoying laying it on like a carny con-person, magnetizing her listeners*) Listen: there was this woman that was dead already . . . he went in, examined her, gave her a miracle medicine . . . she was on her feet and washing dishes an hour later like nothing ever happened!

JACQ.: Are you serious?

MART.: I'm telling you. (*Drawing them to her, to hear the closely guarded secret*) His name is: SGANARELLE.

LUCAS: Listen, where can we find him?

MART.: (*Revelling in it*) Are you in luck!

JACQ.: (*Delighted, hanging on M's every look*) We are?

MART.: (*Nodding conspiratorially*) He's right over there . . . cutting wood . . .

LUCAS: (*Abruptly skeptical again*) Cutting WOOD?

JACQ.: A DOCTOR?

MART.: (*Suddenly realizes that fresh demands are now made on her story-ing talents, and improvises the following somewhat gropingly, but with commendable histrionic sincerity. Throughout her speech L. and J. exchange dubious looks and react with the little natural sounds that people make in such situations.*) Listen—he's—DIFFERENT, ya know what I mean? (*They don't.*)—a little unusual . . . WEIRD, if you want to know . . . eccentric?? I mean, to look at him, you'd never know he's a doctor—grubby clothes . . . He sometimes acts really dumb . . . You see, he says he's burnt out—tired of using his great talent for healing . . . says he's sick of sick people . . . says he wants an early retirement . . . wants to go back to nature—

JACQ.: Really?

MART.: (*Encouraged*) Right! (*Inspiration*) in fact, these days he won't even **admit** he's a doctor . . .

LUCAS: What?

MART.: —without a little (*grabs front of L's shirt*) "**persuasion**" . . .

LUCAS: (*Stunned*) That's crazy.

MART.: (*Agreeing*) I told you he's weird. I'm telling you, he won't even admit he's a doctor unless you really (*whirls fiercely on them*) SHOCK him. One of you has to take him by the hair (*demonstrates on J., two-fistedly*) . . . and the other one has to . . . (*L. covers his head instinctively*) grab him by the feet—(*demonstrates on L.*) like this!

JACQ.: (*intimidated*) Really?

(*Offstage Sgan is heard joyfully singing to himself.*)

MART.: (*Springs behind them, draws them to her so that they are between*

Sgan's entrance and herself.) Here he comes now. Remember what I said . . . He'll tell you, "Who, me—a doctor?— you're out of your mind!"—the whole bit . . . But he's your miracle worker, if you can just PERSUADE him . . .

LUCAS: *(With the conviction of the thoroughly gulled)* Don't worry—we'll PERSUADE him . . .

JACQ.: *(The Mafia look)* We'll bring him out of his "early retirement!"

(Martine has surreptitiously exited as Sganarelle enters, still singing under his breath or whistling, wiping the sweat of his rare honest labor from his very self-satisfied brow, fairly reeking with a complacency which we know will be short-lived.)

LUCAS: *(Acting)* Excuse me, Sir, is your name Sganarelle?

SGAN.: *(Unsuspecting)* Yes! *(Then, picking up on L's self-consciousness, suspecting)*—and no. It depends on what you want with him.

JACQ.: *(All of her charms turned up full)* Oh, we just want to meet him.

SGAN.: *(Delighted)* In that case, my name is Sganarelle.

LUCAS: *(Coming between them)* Delighted to meet you. *(Very sincere now)* There's always a great need for gifted — —

SGAN.: Gifted?

LUCAS: —people like you, and we've heard about your work.

SGAN.: *(A little puzzled, but willing to go along with this high opinion)* Oh . . . well, it's true. *(Off-handedly)* I **am** the best wood cutter in town.

JACQ.: *(With a we're-on-to-you laugh)* Wood-cutter—oh, Sir!

SGAN.: *(Injured dignity)* I take my job seriously and I don't fool around.

JACQ.: *(Pokes him coquettishly)* Doesn't fool around . . .

SGAN.: But I charge twenty minimum for a cord of wood.

JACQ.: *(Breaking up)* Twenty miminum!

SGAN.: What's so funny? I couldn't let it go for less.