



GREENWICH STUDIO THEATRE

Erasmus Montanus

By Ludvig Holberg

4th November 1993 – 28th November 1993

Translated by Julian Forsyth

Directed by Julian Forsyth

PROGRAMME

We have been unable to find a copy of the original programme for the first run of *Erasmus Montanus*. This document is based on the surviving masters.

The missing material includes cast biographies and a note on the translation. However, the programme for the revival of the play in March 1994, also available here, is almost certainly identical apart from the performance dates.

ERASMUS MONTANUS

by Ludvig Holberg

translated and adapted by Julian Forsyth

THE CAST

Rasmus Berg, also known as Erasmus Montanus
Nille Berg, his mother
Jacob Berg, his brother
Lisbeth, his betrothed
Jeronimus, her father
Magdelone, her mother
The Deacon
Niels, a farmer
Gudrun, a farmer's wife
Morten, a farm hand
Lars, a farmer
A Lieutenant
A Corporal



Mark Feakins
Sarah Stephenson
Eddie Marsan
Sonia Abercrombie
Halcro Johnson
Kate Crutchley
Tony Kirwood
Michael Burgess
Sarah Ford
Steven Dykes
Renato Nadal
James Allen
Stuart Mullen

The action takes place in a Danish village
early in the 18th century

There will be no interval

Music: Grieg's 'Holberg Suite'



THE PRODUCTION TEAM

Director
Set Design
Lighting Design
Costume Design

Julian Forsyth
Margarete Forsyth
David Plater
Margarete Forsyth
Beeke Ropers

Company Manager
Stage Manager
Lighting Operator

Julia Crampsie
Renato Nadal
Giorgio Frare

Set Construction

Costumes made by

Giorgio Frare
Renato Nadal
Vicky Emptage
Beeke Ropers
Anja Siemens
Helga Bertazzo

Publicity
Photography
Publicity Design



Louisa Gummer
Camilla Watson
Vicky Emptage

Ludvig Holberg

Two contrasting tendencies are characteristic of Danish literature in the 18th century. One is critical, based on reason, mainly influenced by French and English literature and philosophy; the other is emotional, introspective, often with a tinge of religious mysticism, and in its origin essentially a German movement. Ludvig Holberg is the embodiment of the first tendency. As far as Danes and Norwegians are concerned, all that the 18th century represents in the shape of wit and common sense, of awakening cultural life, of widening intellectual horizons, is concentrated in this one man.

In 1722 the first Danish theatre was founded in Copenhagen. Its directors, two Frenchmen, urgently needed someone to write original plays in Danish to supplement the diet of translations of Moliere. They turned to a university academic who had recently published a mock-heroic poem called *Peder Paars* under the pseudonym Hans Mikkelsen. In this work, a parody of Virgil's *Aeneid*, a Danish tailor's apprentice makes the short trip across the water from Zealand to Jutland to visit his sweetheart. The Olympian Gods interfere for and against him, and in the end this unlikely hero never gets to his destination because the author lost interest in finishing the work. *Peder Paars* was an oblique satire of social conditions prevalent in Denmark, and only just escaped being publicly burned for poking fun at Danish institutions. This literary debut turned its author into Denmark's foremost writer - there was, as yet, no competition - and it was common knowledge in Copenhagen that behind the pseudonym "Hans Mikkelsen" was hiding the current Professor of Eloquence at the University, the Norwegian Ludvig Holberg.

The author of *Erasmus Montanus* and 31 other comedies that are regularly performed in Denmark and Norway but studiously ignored in Britain, was born on December 3rd 1684 in the bustling Hanseatic port of Bergen, the youngest of twelve children. His father, a farm lad who had worked his way up through the army from a private's rank to that of Lieutenant Colonel, died when Ludvig was only a year old, and his mother, who came from a distinguished family of merchants and government officials, died when he was 11, leaving him in the care of her cousin, a pastor. Ludvig was originally intended for the army, but, perhaps because he was small and delicately built, the plan was soon dropped and he was sent to the Latin school in his native city.

fenced with him in Norwegian French, and he parried with his French-Dutch, and I do not believe the French language has ever been worse mistreated. We each spoke incomprehensibly enough when we were by ourselves, but it must have been much worse in the state of anger which then possessed us." Eventually, the two rivals agreed to divide the business.

As soon as he had acquired sufficient funds to travel again, Holberg, undaunted by his first discouraging experience, undertook further trips abroad: first to England, where he appears to have spent two years in the Bodleian Library in Oxford engaged in researches of various kinds, supplementing his meagre income from private tuition with his expertise on the flute. Further studies at the University of Copenhagen were interrupted by a third foreign tour, this time to Germany as travelling companion to a young nobleman.

His fourth European expedition (1714-1716), comprising 18 months in Paris and six in Rome, during which he shared lodgings with an Italian acting troupe, seems finally to have satisfied his irrepressible hunger for travel, and on his return to Copenhagen he settled at last into a poorly paid post at the University as Professor of Metaphysics, a subject he despised. Obligated to begin his tenure with the customary formal oration in praise of his subject, Holberg left his hearers in little doubt as to his true feelings by spicing his address with irony and referring to it afterwards as a funeral oration.

Much to his relief, he was made Professor of Eloquence a few years later in 1720, enabling him to refresh his knowledge of classical literature, and in 1730 he took over the post to which he had always aspired, Professor of his favourite subject History, writing several readable and accessible historical works which were just as highly regarded in his day as the comedies.

Holberg remained a bachelor until his death in 1754. On account of his parsimonious way of life, the money he earned by his writing made him a wealthy man. His acquisition of the title of baron by the bequest of his fortune for the re-establishment of a college is a little out of keeping with the democratic spirit of his writings.

He is claimed by both Denmark and Norway, and in both countries he is affectionately referred to as "Father Holberg". His statue stands by the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen as it does by the National Theatre of Oslo. The epitaph he wished for himself, echoing the words of wisdom expressed by the enlightened Lieutenant at the close of *Erasmus Montanus*, was to be remembered as "a useful citizen".



The Comedies

For the Danish theatre, which opened on September 23, 1722, Holberg wrote 32 comedies, the first 15 of which (including *Erasmus Montanus*) flowed from his pen in a little over a year.

Like other playwrights from the days before the invention of literary copyright, Holberg did not hesitate to take the framework of his plays from a variety of different sources; he borrowed freely from Aristophanes, from Plautus and Terence, from the Italian *Commedia dell'arte*, and from Moliere, to whom he is most often compared, with the important difference that Moliere was a court dramatist, whereas Holberg wrote his plays for and about the ordinary people of his day: officers, artisans, peasants and respectable small town citizens.

The plots in his plays are often conventional, and many of his characters are based on stock comic types, but he always transplants them to native soil and builds on his own experience. He kept his eyes open wherever he went for the "ridiculous in mankind". Most of his plays are centred, like Moliere's, on a central character who personifies some human folly, though in contrast to the driving obsessions of Moliere's *Miser* or *Misanthrope*, the foibles are easily corrigible. *The Political Tinker* ridicules an ignorant know-all who regards himself as a potential political statesman; *The Restless Man* satirises the sort of person who appears to be continuously busy but achieves nothing at all; *Jean de France* exposes the foolish snobbery of educated Danes in the use of the French language and French customs; *Erasmus Montanus* pokes fun at academic pedantry.

Holberg's chief targets - Pedantry and Superstition

There was no type of personality Holberg abhorred more than the pedant. He was compelled to associate with obvious pedants in the University of Copenhagen, particularly during his tenure of the Professorship of Metaphysics. But his campaign against pedantry extended beyond the confines of the university into all walks of life.

He once wrote in an essay that pedants are "the kind of people who treat bagatelles with respect and who immerse themselves so much in useless subtleties that they forget their chief duties and most urgent concerns, who busy themselves with the husk and neglect the kernel, and fall in love with their own follies."

Only in one social class did he find very little pedantry, namely among the peasants: "One can say that of all classes no one is freer of pedantry than the peasant class." But they were in turn badly ridden by superstition, which Holberg ridiculed with almost equal vehemence.

His critique of pedantry on the one hand and superstition on the other is an expression of the rationalistic philosophy which led him to take the "middle course" in all things. He poked fun at extremities of all kinds, whether of orthodoxy or radicalism.

There was occasion enough for this in his own country. Toward the end of the 17th century Denmark-Norway had lost contact with the great currents of intellectual life in Europe. The passion for humanity which had been the criterion of the true humanists and awakened their interest in historical and philological study had turned into pure formalism. Orthodox religion and Latin grammar had combined to change a love of learning into a method without content, a subtle sophistry of knowledge.

This was particularly true of metaphysics, the teachings concerning the supernatural, which had largely been inherited from medieval scholasticism. Even before the Reformation this sublime gothic structure had been hollowed out by the newer scientific views, but many of the Protestant men of learning at Copenhagen were still wrapped up in it and unable to raise their sights beyond it. Metaphysics was to them the supreme test of formalistic learning, and its greatest joy was the *philosophia instrumentalis*, a method of disputing and freely speculating on any subjects (of which the disputants might have no personal knowledge whatsoever) without reference to experience or observable reality. The skills acquired in mastering this method might be useful in the legal profession, but of little benefit to society at large.

The superstitions of the common people flourished in part precisely because of the indifference to their problems shown by the learned. Every unusual event was popularly interpreted as an omen of something else. If a peculiar herring was caught in the Kattegat, it was a sign of impending catastrophes. If a little girl was born with some odd-looking deformations on the top of her head, it was thought to be a warning of the Lord's displeasure with the new fashions in women's hats. Books were published around 1700 in which such ideas were advanced in all seriousness, making even the Lord into a kind of super-pedant.

Holberg's self-appointed task became that of clearing the air in Denmark-Norway of the trend towards pedantry. This was one of the contributions of 18th century thinking in general, and Holberg here brought the Twin Kingdoms of Denmark and Norway into harmony with the best thought of his times. He asked that orthodoxy give way to common sense, that Latin be replaced by the native tongue, and that purely learned studies yield to practical inquiries into the nature of man and his world. These were ideas he advanced in all his writings, seriously in his essays and histories, more lightheartedly and effectively in his comedies, poems and satires, notably in a work he wrote in 1741 which reminds one of *Gulliver's Travels*. In *Niels Klim's Journey Through the Underworld* the hero, in the act of exploring a cave near Bergen, falls through the earth's crust into another world and enters a series of countries that are caricatures of European states. There is a country where monkeys are in charge, and he wins great renown by introducing wigs. Everyone is concerned with ceremony, useless learning, hairsplitting legal decisions, disputations on abstract and impossible themes.

