

# VOLPONE

by Tony Frier – adapted from the original by Ben Johnson

Directed by Tony Frier

To be performed at the Riverhouse Barn, Walton on Thames

10<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> April 2019

Auditions: Monday 10<sup>th</sup> December 2018

Rehearsals Mondays and Wednesdays (probably but subject to confirmation)



## THE PLAY

Volpone was written by Ben Johnson and first performed in the early 1600s. Originally it had 5 acts/34 scenes, a cast of 20+ (2F, 18+M) and ran for over 4 hours with songs and dances. Whilst it had an ingenious plot and some wonderful characters, I thought the original was a bit too ambitious for RDG in the Barn, particularly as the language is of its time and difficult for the modern ear (and some say the Jacobean ear) to understand fully. It is also often criticised for having a sub-plot that simply does not tie into the main plot and serves only to provide a vehicle for Johnson to have a pop at events and personalities of the time, many of which are meaningless to us now.

So, I re-wrote it as I felt it a shame that what is largely such a good play should become forgotten. It's now in present day language (though still set in 1600), 2 acts/8 scenes, a cast of 15, no sub-plot and an estimated running time of 2¼ hours. So, with curtain up at 7.30pm, a 15-minute interval and a fair wind we should be out by 2200. It needs a minimum of 7M and 3F and I'm prepared to consider the remaining 5 as gender fluid. With references to fake news, Brexit, ladyboys, a dead Norwegian parrot, Cafe Nero's, Twitter, threesomes, The Apprentice, S&M, a triple rollover, 50 shades of grey and the German predilection for putting their towels down early, we'll be covering a vast spectrum and should hopefully have a real blast in rehearsing it.

## A QUICK(ISH) SYNOPSIS

The action takes place in seventeenth-century Venice over the course of one day. Volpone (= Fox), a Venetian nobleman and his servant [Mosca](#) (= Mosquito/parasite) are running a con whereby they have put it about that Volpone, who has no heirs to his vast fortune, is dying. This is so his neighbours [Vulture](#) (= Vulture), a lawyer, Madame Corbaccio (= Crow), an old widow, and Corvino (= Raven), a merchant will visit and ingratiate themselves with Volpone by way of bringing him gifts in the hope that they will in time be named Volpone's benefactor.

Mosca, the real mastermind behind the con, persuades Madam Corbaccio to name Volpone as her heir, thereby disinheriting her son Bonario (= Goodness) in favour of Volpone (so Volpone will return the gesture), although Madam Corbaccio is extremely old and sick and more likely to die well before Volpone does.

Volpone learns Corvino's wife Celia is a real stunner and wants to meet her, but Corvino keeps her locked away so a plan is hatched for Volpone to glimpse her outside Corvino's house in St Mark's Square, where we also meet Sir Politic (an English Knight) and Peregrine (an English gentleman traveller). Volpone becomes infatuated with Celia, so Mosca hatches another plan which results in Corvino prostituting Celia to Volpone.

Mosca tells Bonario of his mother's intention to disinherit him and invites him to Volpone's to witness the deed. Lady Politic arrives at Volpone's, but he soon regrets it as he is exasperated by her talkativeness. Mosca gets rid of her by saying that her husband has been seen in a gondola with a courtesan. Volpone then prepares for his seduction of Celia, while Mosca hides Bonario in a closet, in anticipation of Madam Corbaccio's arrival. But Celia and Corvino arrive first. When Celia and Volpone are alone, Volpone leaps out of bed and attempts to seduce and then rape her, but Bonario comes out of the closet (!), and rescues Celia.

Lady Politic finds Sir Politic talking with Peregrine who she is convinced is the courtesan (admittedly, in disguise), but Mosca arrives and tells her the courtesan (ie Celia) is now at the Scrutineo – the Venetian Senate - where she and Bonario have reported Volpone’s deceit/attempted rape, Madam Corbaccio's disinheritance, and Corvino's decision to prostitute his wife.

In the Scrutineo, Voltore the lawyer portrays Bonario and Celia as lovers, Corvino as an innocent jilted husband, and Corbaccio as a wounded mother nearly killed by her evil son. The judges are swayed by Lady P identifying Celia as the courtesan and by Volpone still feigning sickness.

Back home Volpone decides to engage in one final prank by spreading a rumour that he has died and Mosca has been made his heir, just to see the reaction of the legacy hunters.

It all then gets too complicated to summarise here and I don’t want to spoil the ending for you, so you’ll have to read it yourself to see how it ends – ha ha! You can probably understand why the original took over 4 hours and the struggle it’s been to shorten it, but I believe we’re there.

I’m going to be somewhat vague on ages as none are specified in the text and they are flexible although some are relative to each other – we must believe Bonario is Corbaccio’s son, Celia is Corvino’s wife etc.

## CHARACTERS

**Volpone** (M, middle-aged). The play's title character is its protagonist, though an inconsistent one. He is first an instrument and then a victim of Jonson's satire of money-obsessed society. He is an instrument of it because it is through his ingenuity and cleverness that the legacy hunters are duped and he seems to share in Jonson's satiric interpretation of the events. But the satire eventually turns back on him, when he becomes a victim of Mosca's fox-trap. The reason he is ensnared by Mosca is that he cannot resist one final gloat at his dupes, oblivious to the fact that in doing so, he too is caught. This lack of rational forethought and commitment to his own sensual impulses, is characteristic of Volpone. He is a creature of passion, an imaginative hedonist continually looking to find and attain new forms of pleasure, whatever the consequences may be. This dynamic in his character shapes our reaction to him throughout the play. At times, this hedonism seems fun, engaging, entertaining, and even morally valuable, but his attempted seduction of Celia reveals a darker side to his hedonism.

**Mosca** (M, any age). The true mastermind – ingenious, cunning, two-timing, quick-thinking, lacking in scruples, deceptive. His most important deception is the one he effects on Volpone (and the audience), hiding his true nature and intentions from both. Initially he appears to be a clinging, servile parasite, who only exists for Volpone and through Volpone. But he changes; his confidence grows and he stabs Volpone in the back. Do we like him? Tricky. He and Volpone are being deceitful, but being deceitful to the three greedy carrion, but then he turns on Volpone which should be applauded, but it’s for personal gain. Perhaps the largest part in the play, he has a lot of the comedy and a hidden darker side.

**Voltore** (M/F, middle-aged.). Intended (and probably preferred) as being a man, but nothing about the character to prevent Voltore being female (although I’ll need to re-write a couple of lines). OK, there were no female lawyers in 17<sup>th</sup> century Venice, but if we are to allow licence for two of the judges to be female then by default Voltore could also be female. Astute, persuasive, oily and able to throw a fit on the floor when he pretends to be possessed by a demon. He is perhaps the least unpleasant of all the legacy hunters, for he is the least crass and the least obsessed with seeing [Volpone](#) die. Intellectually superior and a somewhat preferential status as he ‘leads’ the other legacy hunters.

**Corvino** (M, middle-aged) ‘an arrogant, snivelling, limp-membered shit’. An extremely vicious and dishonourable character, Corvino is Celia's jealous husband. We definitely don’t like him. Controlling, cruel, greedy and impotent. Often the butt of Mosca’s jokes. He is more concerned with financial gain than with Celia’s faithfulness, seeing her, in essence, as a piece of property, and willing to go out onto the streets and declare himself cuckolded if it means he gains the inheritance.

**Corbaccio** (F, older). ‘a face that sours milk’! In Jonson’s original, a man but ‘re-imagined’ as an aging widow who is extremely ill herself and is much more likely to die before Volpone even has a chance to bequeath her his wealth. Single-mindedly intent on growing rich to the extent of disinheriting her son and willing to provide poison to

finish off Volpone (though unwilling to administer it). Delights in Volpone's apparent demise. A pitiful character but we don't pity her. Heartless and blinded by greed in falling for Mosca's ruse that her son was intending to kill her. Some comic moments largely to do with her weak old bladder.

**Celia** (F, younger than Corvino). 'unbelievably fair', 'her face is a wonder'. Virtuous, true, honourable, pious and loyal – it is only with great reluctance and out of a sense of obedience to Corvino that she agrees to sleep with Volpone though the idea is abhorrent to her. Her willingness to subject herself to Corvino's harsh diktats and abuse may make her seem weak, but she has an inner moral sense in that she refuses Volpone against her husband's express wishes. One lovely comic scene when Corvino orders her to do everything backwards (oo-er).

**Bonario** (M, comparable age to Celia and to being Corbaccio's son). Bonario is an upright chap, the knight in shining armour who remains loyal to his mother even when she perjures against him in court. He heroically rescues Celia from Volpone and represents bravery and honour, qualities which the other characters clearly lack. Somewhat arrogant on first meeting Mosca, but then shows concern about offending him.

**Sir Politic Would-be** (M, middle to old aged) An English knight residing in Venice. Sir P was the central role in the now-deleted sub-plot, but remains in the play to introduce a couple of scenes. Gullible, self-opinionated, hen-pecked, we sympathise with him – not least for having lived with Lady P for 43 years. The victim of a misunderstanding which he deals with by saying it's all his fault and running away. Can double as one of the commandadori.

**Lady Politic Would-be** (F, a bit younger than Sir P) She is extremely vain and talkative, larger than life, loud and always wanting to be the centre of attention. Buxom and dominating Sir P. Somewhat immoral – partly because she falsely accuses the innocent Celia of being the courtesan she saw with Sir P and partly because of a deal she's offering with handcuffs and a dog-collar! (OK, so that last bit wasn't in the original.)

**Peregrine** (M, young/middle-aged). An English gent travelling round Italy and looking to learn from Sir P about all things Italian. Astute and sees Sir P's folly and ignorance. Again, he was a significant part of the deleted sub-plot, but is important for a great scene when Lady P mistakes him for the courtesan and he starts to drop his trousers to prove he is a man whilst Lady P tries to keep them up to prevent 'her' displaying her front bottom. Can double as one of the commandadori.

**Androgyno** (M/F, any age) An hermaphrodite who is the under-servant. A small part with a dozen or so lines, the underdog who we sympathise with when Mosca sacks him/her. Appears briefly throughout the play.

**Avocatori** (Avocs 1 & 2 M/F, Avoc 3 M. Age – old enough to have the gravitas of being a senior judge) The three judges represent the law and are Johnson's dig at how easily the law is swayed. Although initially duped by the silver-tongued Voltore they do preside over the right outcome (though this is hardly anything to do with them). Only in Act 2 and essentially three very sedentary roles. Avocs 1 & 2 are serious and severe whilst Avoc 3 is doddery and more interested in going for a nap.

**Notario** (M/F, any age). The clerk of the Court – a small role only appearing in the Act 2 court scenes.

**Commandadori** – sergeants of the Court, any age and preferably male. Two small non-speaking roles only appearing in the Act 2 court scenes.

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