

The President

by Ferenc Molnár, adapted by Morwyn Brebner

Directed by Blair Williams

“It must be very wonderful, sir, to have almost all mankind at your disposal.”

One of the joys of programming the lunchtime play is the chance for us to program one-act plays. There are few opportunities to see these little gems that so many playwrights write but are so rarely performed. *The President* is a particularly appealing one-act because not only is it a very funny play, but much of the humour comes from the fact that it all happens in real time. Everything has to be wrapped up in an hour and that’s the joy of staging, and watching this play.

The entire play swirls around Norrison, a bank president who is about to go on his first holiday in a very long time. He’s a very powerful man and he’s taking some deserved time off with his family. Not only is he a busy CEO but he’s also been the caretaker of a young woman, Sylvia, daughter of a top tycoon who is also an important business connection for Norrison. Everything in his life seems to be running smoothly – his company is a well-oiled machine and everything seems just about perfect ... so you know something bad is about to happen ...

Sylvia arrives and announces that her parents are arriving within the hour, but that’s not her only news for Norrison. She’s in love with a man. What’s worse, she married him four months ago. What’s even worse is he’s poor. Norrison tries to guess how ‘low’ her new husband might be:

Norrison: Is he a government official?

Sylvia: Lower.

Norrison: Bus-boy?

Sylvia: Lower.

Norrison: Shoe-shine?

Sylvia: Lower.

Norrison: Playwright?

Sylvia: A little higher.

Norrison: Chauffeur?

Sylvia: Stop.

To be precise, he’s a cab driver. And a revolutionary, a communist – but with ambition as Sylvia says. When Norrison suggests immediate divorce, she won’t do it. And when pressed, she admits that she is pregnant. The groom is brought in and we find out his rather unfortunate name: Harry Foot. Norrison says there’s only one way out and that is to make this man over and there the race begins.

It’s a kind of male *Pygmalion* and in quick time. He presses his buzzer on his desk and calls in the troops. Everything begins moving in high speed from here to the end, transforming Harry Foot into Count Harry San Marino-Schattenburg. Norrison manages, in under an hour, to change his clothes, his hair, where he lives, his social position, gives him a new father, a new job, a new car, publicity in newspapers and magazines, teaches him how to speak about everything from politics to science to art in a few easy sentences. It’s a completely successful transformation of which mankind, Norrison says at the end of the play, should be ashamed.

You’re likely familiar with some of Ferenc Molnár’s other works. His play *Lilliom* written in 1909, became the Rogers and Hammerstein musical *Carousel* (1944). His 1921 play *The Swan*, a comedy about a girl being groomed to marry a prince, was filmed in 1956 starring Grace Kelly. *The President*, written in 1930, was made into a film in 1961 called *One, Two, Three*, adapted from *The President* and directed by Billy Wilder, starring James Cagney as ‘the president’. Adapter Morwyn Brebner brought her considerable skills to a previous adaptation at the Shaw Festival – in 2006 she adapted two Chekhov farces, *The Bear* and *The Proposal*, under the title *Love Among the Russians* and we look forward to her witty take on this story.