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John Gay's "The Beggar's Opera" brief history and upcoming showing

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Special to NTN, 12/10/24

by Martha Wolf

Rogues, robbers, and harlots should substantially enliven Salve Regina College's campus theatre when John Gay's "The Beggar's Opera" is brought to the stage on December 13 and 14 at 8:00 PM.

Director Joan David comments, "Gay's characters, with their hypocritical code of morality and honor, reflect the tendencies of the government of his time."

Upon the premier of the lusty comedy in 1728, Gay's good friend, Alexander Pope, conceded that the play would make "a great noise," but "whether of claps or hisses, I know not."

The satire was an instant success, though perhaps not for the reasons Gay had hoped. Each of his knaves considers himself to be a gentleman, and each prostitute acts like the most elegant of court ladies. Gay wanted the upper crust of London to see themselves in these characters, but most of the theatre goers simply fell in love with them.

One who was a bit more perceptive was Robert Walpole, then prime minister, who is represented in the despicable character of Peachum. Peachum, an informer and head of a gang of thieves, suggests that businessmen and thieves are one. "'Tis but fitting that we should protect and encourage Cheats," he says, "since we live by them."

Indignant at this defamation, Walpole tried to keep the play from being shown, but

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the people were enjoying Gay's unsavory characters just too much to part with them.

The play is far from being an accurate representation of life, and this is what makes it laughable. The characters frequently break into song and dance, and their actions are somewhat exaggerated. When Polly, the daughter of Peachum, announces that she has married, her parents are aghast. They could understand if the girl had married for money, or honor, but she tells them she has married for love. "Love him!" shrieks her outraged mother, "worse and worse! I thought the girl had been better bred." Mrs. Peachum promptly faints, quite overcome with shock.

The comedy came to America a year after its premier. It has been adapted by many other playwrights, such as Brecht in his "Three Penny Opera." It was this play that made infamous such names as Mack the Knife, Suky Tawdry, and Jenny Diver. The play is also a spoof of Italian opera, which dominated the London stage at that time. "The Beggar's Opera" and adaptations of it have been performed on and off ever since.

Heading the cast for this production are Mike Radkovich as MacHeath, Janet Dawson as Polly Peachum, and Cindy Killavey as Lucy Lockit. Salve Regina students and staff constitute the rest of the cast. Glenn Giuttari is musical director for the play, and Paula O'Malley is the production manager. Mrs. Roger Burton will provide the harpsichord music.

Tickets will be available at the box office for \$2.00 on the night of the performance.