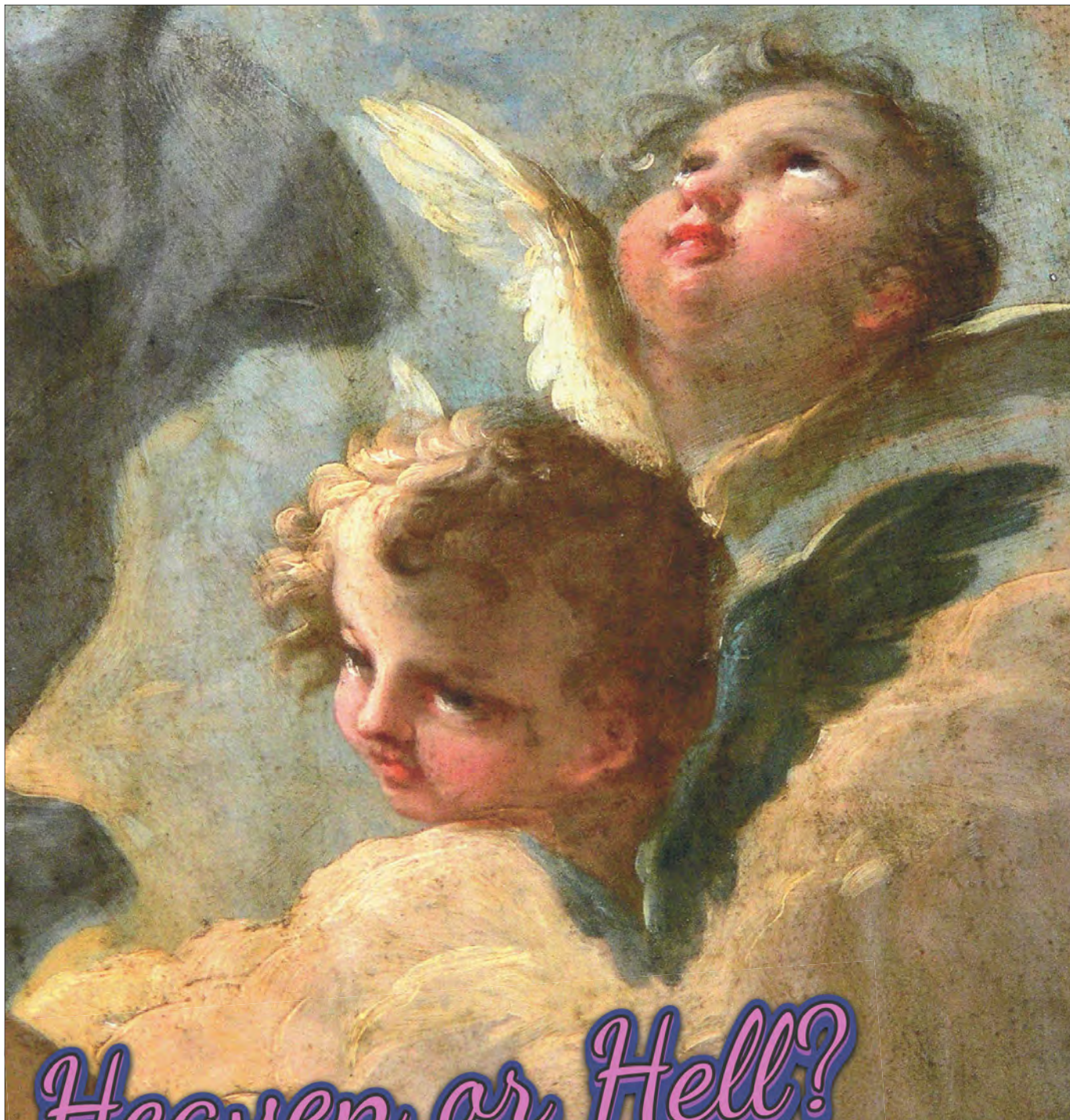


# COMPASS

Your Guide to Tri-State Events

December 8, 2022



*Heaven or Hell?*

PAINTING DETAIL FROM  
MARIA IMMACULATA (1728)

Choose your path with bold artistic efforts this month, although you may find it's not as easy as you thought to distinguish the angelic from the demonic.



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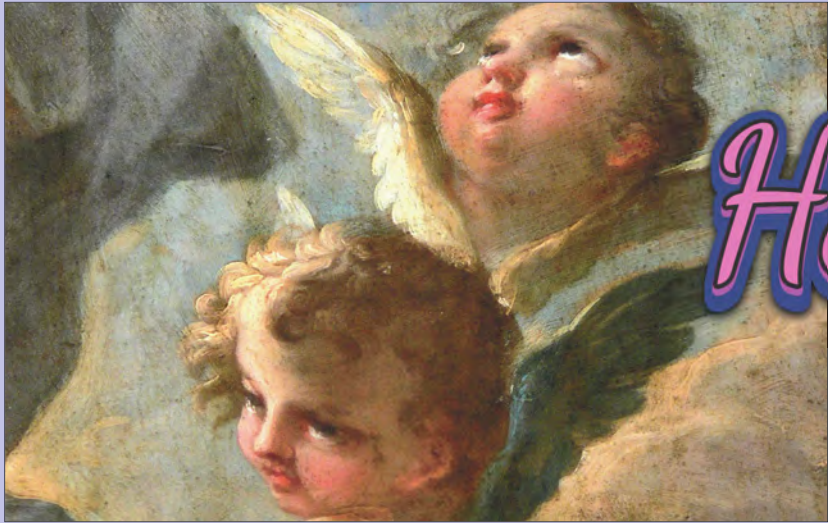
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PAINTING DETAIL FROM MARIA IMMACULATA (1728) BY MARTINO ALTOMONTE

## COMPASS

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# Where Are You Going? Heaven or Hell?

December is the season of lights, but it is also the darkest time of year — just ask the residents of Northern Sweden, who refer to the fall of darkness as *polarnatt* or “polar night,” a time in Scandinavia when the sun sets for more than 24 hours. Darkness and light are a part of the winter culture, the twilight magic of the approaching shortest day of the year. This Compass embraces the intensity of dichotomy, the double-faced Janus month of joy and misery, Christian charity and Christmas capitalism, excess and poverty, good and evil. Choose your path in my calendar of bold artistic efforts available to the public this month, although you may find it’s not as easy as you thought to distinguish the angelic from the demonic. The pursuit of piety and pleasure can exist within one.

*Seasons greetings from your Compass editor,  
 Alexander Wilburn*



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ART: ALEXANDER WILBURN

# Versailles' Heavenly Bodies

A highly desirable guest. What could be a more delicious way to be described? And by Nancy Mitford no less. Long after her death, Jeanne Antoinette Poisson received this delectable sobriquet from Mitford, who wrote that Poisson's innate desirability stemmed from "her looks and elegance, and possessing as she did that intense love of life, and interest in human beings, which is perhaps the basis of what we variously call charm, sex appeal or fascination." Bright Young Thing that she was, Nancy Mitford knew a thing or two about people in



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**Portrait of Madame de Pompadour**  
by François Boucher

possession of charm and fascination (not to mention fascism, but that's another story). A friend to Evelyn Waugh, Mitford was born to privilege, money and dysfunction, and used her intricate knowledge of upper class (or "U") curiosities as both a novelist and a biographer. Her nonfiction works included historical accounts of the colorful lives of Voltaire, Louis XIV known as The Sun King, and the greatest mistress to sleep her way to the top of Versailles' pecking order, Jeanne Poisson — the Madame de Pompadour.

When the aristocracy still ruled France, when marriage was for duty and mistresses were for pleasure (and power), the flirtatious charged, mad-cap meeting of Jeanne Antoinette and King Louis XV was legend. The initially low-born Jeanne may have already been married, but the opportunity to ensnare the king was too enticing. "Every pretty woman in the Ile de France nurtured a conviction that she would carry off the prize," Mitford wrote. "Such was the prestige of the monarch in those days, so nearly was he considered a god, that very little shame attached to the position of his mistress." Not to mention an apartment in Versailles and a fortune paid to the lucky woman's family. Jeanne caught his attention purposely blocking off his carriage with her conspicuously feminine pink phaeton, and he in turn made his move by inviting her to a masked ball, where he met her in disguise while she dressed as the Roman lunar goddess of the hunt, Diana. Louis, Mitford wrote, "had never known that particularly delightful relationship of sex mixed with laughter."

Her feminine tastes and patronage to artists help cultivate the Rococo decorative movement, and her best-known portraits were com-

missions by François Boucher. The 18th century French painter was the Rococo master of voluminous silk gowns, plump, milky skin, rounded, soft breasts and buttocks, wild swans, fluttering pink ribbons and periwinkle blue skies. Romantic and erotic, pastoral and mythical, Boucher crafted pastel paradise on the canvas, and his portraits of Jeanne feature her in blissful rule as the court's maîtresse-en-titre.

*"Promenades on Paper: Eighteenth-Century French Drawings from the Bibliothèque nationale de France" with selected works by François Boucher opens at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass., on Dec. 17.*



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## The Scent of Angels

The smell of Christmas memories, but oh so dirty. That was the promise of Angel, the Thierry Mugler 1992 eau de parfum shaped like a starry ornament cut from diamond-sharp ice. Paradox spritzed out from the chilly winter-blue bottle, all sweetness and warmth, sugary cotton candy and sweet amber, berries and spices, chocolate and a heaping of patchouli. The ads were devilish for an angel's scent, the Ferrari-curves of Mick Jagger's lover, Jerry Hall, as a siren in the sand (her daughter, bombshell model Georgia May Jagger would later take over the Angel role in 2014).

Hardly ethereal, Mugler's celestial beings were hedonistic, more like the inter-demential aliens in gay hustler-turned-novelist Clive Barker's "Hell-raiser" — "demons to some, angels to others."

Back before the watered-down minimalism of the modern day fashion industry, even among the outrageous originality of the 1980s and '90s catwalks, Manfred Thierry Mugler rose above as a true original. The French designer, who began as a young gay ballet dancer at the Opéra National du Rhin, pioneered syn-

thetic, initially "low-end" fabrics like vinyl, latex and faux fur. Similarly, his catwalks were carnivals of unexpected casting, pulling from "low" culture to carry off his couture creations — down the runway came the handsomely bronzed-up gay porn star Jeff Stryker in black leather pants and calf-spotted cowboy chaps, both of which he sensationally stripped off to reveal a pair of black briefs, "Lucky" and "Me" scripted over each butt cheek. Mugler also cast Connie Fleming, a Black trans woman known for her performances in the downtown drag New York nightclub scene.

Mugler died at age 73 this year, but his colorful career will be remembered for a forward-thinking openness to sexuality and racial diversity, his off-kilter, cybernetic sense of the strange, his transmutation of rubber into a statement of radical femininity, and his combined stitching of science fiction, sex appeal and the ultimate sartorial call to strength — the power suit. Hillary Clinton wore Angel, after all.

*"Thierry Mugler: Couturissime" is now on view at The Brooklyn Museum in Brooklyn, N.Y.*

— Alexander Wilburn



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**DANCE: ALEXANDER WILBURN**

# Balanchine's Candied Paradise of Childhood

Sugar plums and marzipan, dewdrops, chocolates and candy canes, the wonders of "The Nutcracker's" Land of Sweets are treats and spectacles, perhaps no greater than the fantasy of the immense rising Christmas tree, which grows towering like a magic bean stalk from the stage. As midnight chimes on Christmas Eve, a young girl meets a young prince in disguise, and both are flung into a secret battle of tin soldiers, gingerbread men and a multi-headed mouse framed in faces like a Hindu god. Based on the novella by German author E.T.A. Hoffmann, the ballet set to a score by Tchaikovsky was deemed a failure at the end of

the 19th century, but was revived as an enduring classic by choreographer George Balanchine's New York City Ballet in 1954 (they have performed it every year since). "The Father of American Ballet," Balanchine had been a master for The Ballets Russes under Sergei Diaghilev, the man responsible for the widespread popularity of ballet in Europe. Balanchine's trademark dance method he honed at his American company can be seen in the severity of the speed and strong, clean lines created by the highly flexible ballerinas. The Sugar Plum Fairy as he choreographed it remains the most changing role in ballet — put through hell to dance like an angel.



"The Nutcracker" is now being performed by the New York City Ballet at Lincoln Center in New York, N.Y., and by the Nutmeg Ballet Conservatory at The Warner Theatre in Torrington, Conn., on Dec. 10, 11, 17 and 18.



PHOTOS BY ERIN BAIANO



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Robert Downey Jr. in “Home For the Holidays,” and, right, director Jodie Foster on set of filming.

**FILM: ALEXANDER WILBURN**

# The Hell of Your Home

When you go home do you look around and wonder, “Who are these people, where did I even come from?” Claudia Larson, as played by Holly Hunter, wonders. “I mean, you look at them all sitting there, you know... they look familiar, but who the hell are they?”

What could be more familiar, and familial, a sentiment? 1995’s “Home for The Holidays,” the sophomore directorial effort from former child actress Jodie Foster, serves mashed potato, creamed corn slop and the slush of November’s dying color-grade — dingy grays, dreary maroons, stale coffee browns. Set in a suburb of Baltimore, single mother Claudia returns to her parents’ house for Thanksgiving after losing her job (and losing her teenage daughter to her boyfriend’s family). The film is turgid and nostalgic, capturing a particularly cozy American ugliness.

Foster, who directed and re-wrote

the original screenplay, seems to fracture her psyche between her characters, splitting her concerns. There’s the wry, straight-shooting, but put-upon workhorse Claudia, and there’s her brother Tommy, played with a dashing freneticism by a young, and still heroin-addicted, Robert Downey Jr. (Downey has spoken publicly on the subject). With the shadow of the AIDS crisis still looming in America, Foster wrote and directed Tommy with a scandalizing sense of freedom, as a young man, it turns out, with little emotional need for his family. He’s already secretly married his boyfriend, surrounded by their friends, in a far off world he’s crafted for himself, that the limited scope of his family (or Foster’s public at the time) could never understand.

*Screening presented by The Boondocks Film Society at The Moviehouse in Millerton, N.Y. on Dec. 13.*



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# Return to Lars Von Trier's Purgatory of Pain

After 25 years the doors have opened again. The first name in Danish filmmaking and the bad boy of avant-garde arthouse cinema returns to the television series he originally concluded in 1997, now with a final third season. Lars von Trier, who pioneered the art movement Dogme 95 — a strict, stripped-back style that “returned power to the director” — and shocked the Cannes Film Festival with explosive, divisive entries like “Antichrist,” “Dogville” and “Nymphomaniac,” took an unexpected, brief path into television in the 1990s. Inspired by what was happening overseas as David Lynch’s experimental tonal shifts on ABC’s “Twin Peaks” — surreal, foreboding, a soap opera spliced with Dadaism — changed the landscape of the medium, von Trier hoped to do the same for Danish



*Continued on next page*

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## ... purgatory

*Continued from previous page*

broadcast television. Shot in eerie orange sepia on a wild handheld camera and a budget of perhaps kr35.00, von Trier's supernatural hospital show "The Kingdom" is darkly absurd, a claustrophobic dreamscape where exorcisms, severed heads, bureaucracy and dry, situational humor collide. Called "Riget" in the Danish broadcast, a nickname for Rigshospitalet, the largest public teaching hospital in Copenhagen, the series attracted vocal fans, including American master of horror, Stephen King. The long awaited third season, "The Kingdom: Exodus" brings the full episode count up to 13, but five hours is really more than enough time for von Trier's dark humored nihilism to alter your brain.

*MUBI presents the digital restored three seasons of "The Kingdom" at Film at Lincoln Center in New York, N.Y., starting Dec. 16.*



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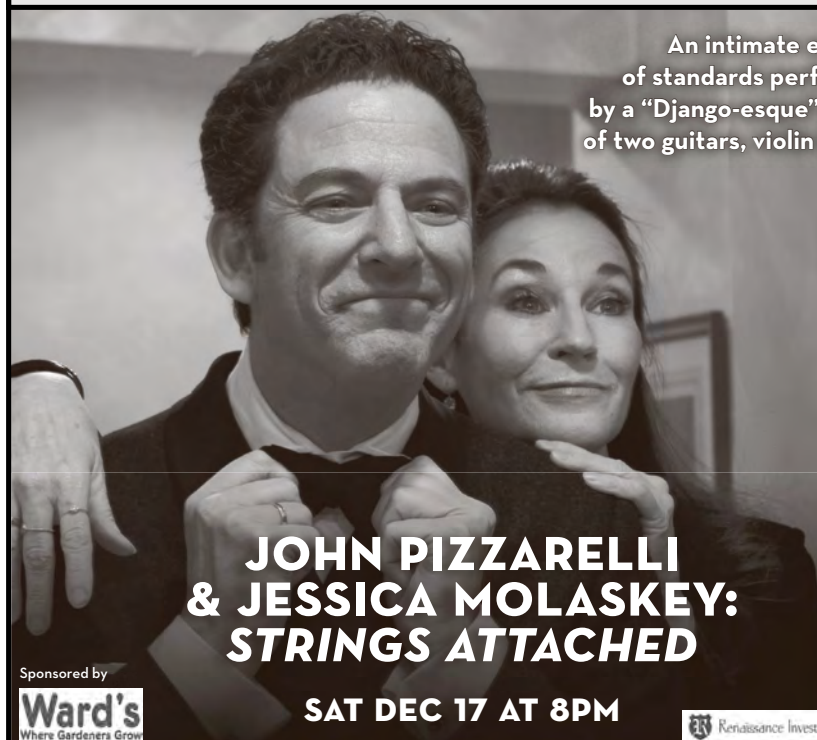
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## Return to Heaven with Bach's Birth of Christ

**W**eihnachts Oratorium or The Christmas Oratorio is an usual piece broken into chapters like an unfolding narrative story. Written by famed German Baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach in 1734, the six cantatas were created for a Christmastide audience, and it has perhaps survived as a classic of the festive winter season for its inherent story-like quality, progressing like a play. Lengthy as it may be it was, in fact, meant to be played across six days. Beginning on Christmas Day, the first part, with its jubilant

trumpeted introduction of choral revelry, announces The Birth of Christ. The flutes take the lead in the second part, The Adoration of The Shepherds, as an angel appears to the humble men and their flocks, guiding them towards Bethlehem. This would have been played on the day after Christmas, St. Stephen's Day, a public holiday in Bach's native Germany. The third part, a return to jubilation on St. John's Day, tells of the shepherd's arrival to gaze upon Christ in the manger. On New Year's Day, Bach intended the fourth part to be played, marking The Nam-

ing of Christ. As described in Luke 2:21, "And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb." On the Second Sunday after Christmas, the fifth part tells of the wise men who followed the star from their foreign kingdoms, a journey poet T.S. Eliot lyrically narrated in a 1927 series of verses — "Just the worst time of the year / For a journey, and such a long journey / The ways deep and the weather sharp / The very dead of winter. / And the

camels galled, sorefooted, refractory / Lying down in the melting snow." Lastly, is The Adoration of the Magi, a piece which concludes with Mary, Joseph and Jesus' Flight to Egypt from The Gospel of Matthew, as depicted with glowing, nighttime intensity in the 1627 Dutch Golden Age oil painting by Rembrandt, a 1614 oil by Rubens, and many others.

*Crescendo will perform "Resonet In Laudibus - Resounding Joyful Praises" Renaissance and Baroque holiday music for chorus and brass at Trinity Lime Rock Church in Lakeville, Conn., on Dec. 10.*



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**THEATER: ALEXANDER WILBURN**

## A Safe Heaven from the Hell the Homeless Crisis

It doesn't take much more than anecdotal evidence to notice the homelessness crisis in New York City. This year the Coalition for The Homeless, a nonprofit advocacy group, reported that New York City's levels of homeless residents have reached their highest numbers since the 1930s' Great Depression era, with "60,252 homeless people, including 19,310 homeless children, sleeping each night in New York City's main municipal shelter system" in September. The housing market in the city combines high demand, inflated prices and low supply. Between soaring rents, the continued COVID-19 pandemic and the current migrant crisis, those numbers may only get worse in the next year. Reported by The New York Times this month, "About 3,400 people were living in streets and subways in January, according to an

annual estimate that is often criticized as an undercount."

On Site Opera, a performance group who utilize changing, unusual venues to bring accessibility, equity and diversity to the art of opera is pairing with Chelsea's Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen (the largest in Manhattan) for a production of "Amahl and the Night Visitors" by Italian composer and librettist Gian Carlo Menotti. Inspired by The Adoration of The Magi, the one-act opera will feature both renowned opera soloists and musicians and a Shepherds Chorus composed of New York residents who have experienced homelessness and food scarcity first hand.

"Amahl and the Night Visitors" will be performed at Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen in New York, N.Y., on December 8 through 10. Audiences are asked to bring a non-perishable food donation.

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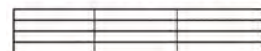
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**THEATER: ALEXANDER WILBURN**

## Heavenly Houses, Devilish Wit

It is with some irony to note that despite the controlling school years calendars — the ebb and flow of semesters, sports and winter break — during which most 21st century girls consume with some fervor the works of Jane Austen, the 19th century author of landed gentry romances scarcely replied upon the seasons for setting. Apart from her final published work, “Persuasion,” a more staid expression of aging and the equinox of autumn, the country lands Austen’s characters inhabit exist in a kind of eternal tepid spring, with long pastoral walks thwarted only by unexpected rain — and rain, any Janeite will tell you, is just an excuse to have a heroine catch a dramatic cold.

off casually midway through “Pride and Prejudice” via a rather fiendish, emotionally destructive letter sent to Jane Bennet from Caroline Bingley, the scheming sister of Jane’s object of affection, the affable Charles. Under the wicked but gossamer-thin guise of a confession between friends, Miss Bingley “confides” that their family has permanently absconded for the winter season and the whole lot of them are rooting for Charles to propose to Georgiana, the young ward of the brooding Mr. Darcy. “I sincerely hope your Christmas in Hertfordshire may abound in the gaieties which that season generally brings,” Caroline tosses off at the end after dashing

The December holiday is tossed

*Continued on next page*



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# Happier Holidays



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## ... heavenly homes, devilish wit

Continued from previous page

the girl's dreams.

A kind of "XOXO, go die."

This mock-gesture of good Christmas tidings is well in line with Austen's satirical writing, ever-ready to poke fun at the mannered hypocrisy of her genteel class.

This yuletide season, Shakespeare & Company takes Austen's characters into full Christmas celebration with a staged, costumed reading of "Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley," written by Lauren Gunderson and Margot Melcon, and directed by Ariel Bock. Following the novel's conclusion and the wedding of Elizabeth Bennet to Mr. Darcy, "Miss Bennet" picks up as an alternative prologue focusing on the oft-overlooked middle Bennet sister, Mary.

Oh Mary, Mary, so very contrary — plain, vain and truly a pain. She is as untalented musically as she is in con-

versation. "Mary had neither genius nor taste," Austen wrote, "and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached." To a degree, though it hardly makes her less pedantic, she is occasionally aware of her ill-fit among others. As she herself tells her sister when it comes to gentlemen and balls, "But I confess they would have no charms for me. I should infinitely prefer a book."

What kind of scripted suitor Gunderson and Melcon have cooked up for the sour middle child Mary Bennet... audiences will have to wait to discover.

"*Miss Bennet: Christmas At Pemberley*" will be performed Dec. 16 through 18 at Shakespeare & Company's Elayne P. Bernstein Theatre in Lenox, Mass.



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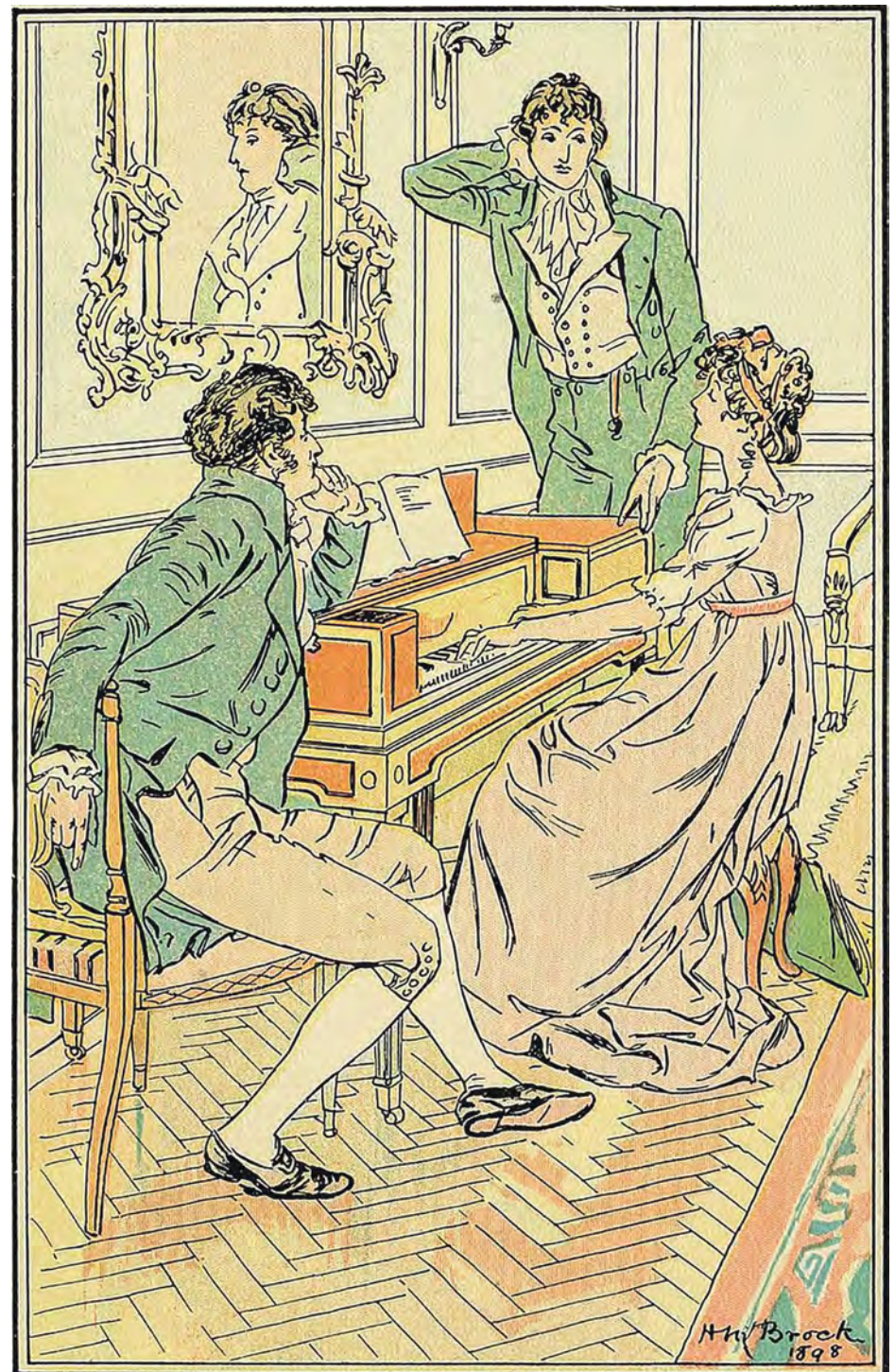


ILLUSTRATION BY H. M. BROCK

*Illustrations from 'The Novels and Letters of Jane Austen' edited by Reginald Bramley Johnson, 1906*



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