

The Way of the World

Folger Theater

A new comedy adapted from the play by William Congreve

Written and directed by Theresa Rebeck

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Program Notes by Laura J. Rosenthal, Professor of English, University of Maryland

In Theresa Rebeck's adaptation of *The Way of the World*, characters sip blue martinis and other colorful drinks as a sign of their sophistication. Blue martinis are a particularly appropriate choice: this fashionable drink takes its color from blue curacao, a liqueur originally crafted by Lucas Bols, a Dutch contemporary of William Congreve, and flavored by the peels of the laraha orange, native to the Caribbean island of Curacao. Bols was able to bring such exotic flavors to his family distillery when he became a major shareholder in the Dutch East India Company.<sup>1</sup> The Hampton elite in Rebeck's adaptation distinguish themselves through such cosmopolitan consumption; in doing so, they echo a crucial theme in Congreve's *Way of the World* (1700), which opens in a "chocolate house," an institution that plays a key role in this comedy, as do beverages with pharmaceutical properties. In the adaptation, characters end up in awkward sexual situations after their blue martinis; some eighteenth-century critics, however, suspected coffee, tea, and chocolate as having similar effects on judgment and the body.

Like the blue martini, they also signaled power struggles in a global context: in negotiating the terms of her marriage, the reluctant heroine of Congreve's play insists that, in partial compensative for "dwindling" into a wife, that she remain "sole Empress" of her tea table. Tea, coffee, and chocolate have become commonplace beverages, but London saw its first coffee houses only one generation before Congreve's play first opened. In Congreve's time, coffee houses were still exotic institutions, modeled on those admired by travelers to the Ottoman Empire. In some coffee houses, proprietors even wore turbans to remind customers of the Ottoman origin this institution. English chocolate came from the colonies, produced by slave labor—a brutal system that still haunts this treat.<sup>2</sup> Tea, a drink now understood as quintessentially British, only became popular in the late seventeenth century with the marriage of King Charles II to the Portuguese Catherine of Braganza. The Portuguese has long enjoyed tea, a benefit from their ambitious trading voyages to China. In Congreve's time, tea remained a relatively new import, and the English were in the process of developing socially significant rituals around this beverage, with the most important woman of the household presiding over the tea ceremony.<sup>3</sup> Thus Congreve's heroine is not being bossy by demanding control of her tea-table, but rather establishing her place in a complex social hierarchy.

When characters drink their blue martinis in *The Way of the World*, they, like their predecessors, signal their own cosmopolitanism and their nation's place in a global network of taste.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on his story, see <https://www.lucasbols.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> See Carol Off, *Bitter Chocolate : The Dark Side of the World's Most Seductive Sweet*. New York: New Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> See Markman Ellis, et al. *Empire of Tea : The Asian Leaf That Conquered the World*. London, Reaktion Books, 2015.