Moliere is alive and well in Lawrence, thanks to director Mechele Leon. Moliere satirizes both the doctors of his day and those who make a hobby of illnesses. In the hands of Mechele Leon, the events on stage seem faithful to 17th-century France and at the same time so immediate that the audience is carried along from beginning to end.

Mechele Leon has not only mounted a splendid production of Moliere’s classic Le malade imaginaire (The Hypochondriac), she has also revived his short one-act The Rehearsal and deftly joined it to its full-length companion. The Rehearsal is a small gem, rarely performed because of its brevity and its constant topical references to 17th-century France. Professor Leon has adapted it, making it the rehearsal for The Hypochondriac, which the King will shortly arrive to see. The cast complain about the play, their roles, their lines, and their lack of rehearsal. Moliere himself tries to whip them into shape, just as trumpets announce the royal arrival.

How do you convincingly turn college students into 17th-century French bourgeois? Wisely, there’s no effort to produce French accents, but the cast all deliver their lines so crisply—and at 1 ½ times normal speed—that there’s a pleasing sense of otherness. Also, you call on Leslie Bennett, choreographer, to insure that all the cast move as their counterparts did in 1673—and there’s a big difference.

Moliere drew freely on stock characters dating back to Roman comedy, including the “Heavy Father” and the “Tricky Servant.” These two especially are brought to life in this production. In an opening scene, Argan (Adrian Brothers as the hypochondriac) and Toinette (Rendi Renee Doran as the maid) argue over Argan’s proposed choice of an unwanted husband for Angelique. Their extended rapid-fire exchange on the subject of Angelique’s proposed arranged marriage goes at a breathless pace. You can feel the audience leaning forward, wondering if they can keep it up—and they do. And though ensemble acting prevails throughout, Rendi’s Toinette is so spirited that scene-stealing is imminent.

The action turns on Argal’s addiction to doctors, and his determination that his daughter Angelique (Abby Sharp) marry Thomas, a maladroit boob who happens to be a doctor, so that Argal will always have a free doctor in the family. We see Thomas (Joe Lilek) plead his suit in stilted memorized speeches, delivered in a superfast gabble, and we gladly side with Angelique’s choice of the sympathetic Cleante (Christoph Nevins).

In fact, Cleante pleads his suit in a fine interlude while posing as Angelique’s music teacher. He sketches the plot of a pastoral romance, with himself and Angelique thinly disguised as shepherd and shepherdess in love who should clearly not be separated. They conclude the story with a vocal duet, composed by accompanist Ryan McCall. Both have excellent voices, and Abby’s high soprano especially lends heft to this impromptu operetta.

There are many obstacles to the young pair’s love, not least the schemes of Argan’s wife Beline,
who wants the daughters sent to a convent and Argan’s estate conveyed to her. But in the end Argan’s pretended death exposes Beline’s true feelings (and the faithful Angelique’s as well). Then all that remains is Argan’s need of a doctor ready to hand, especially since his primary-care doctor has just fired him for lack of reverence.

This final obstacle is overcome by his brother Beralde (the excellent Kevin Siess) proposing that he become a doctor himself. Though Argan objects, Beralde points out that all that’s really necessary is to be confident and talk in lots of big words. At that point, the entire cast fills the stage, dressed in black doctors’ robes, and after a comic question-and-answer session, they proclaim him a doctor.

Words fail me in describing this final scene, Mechele Leon’s inspired invention, with her lyrics and Michael Wyson’s music. After each pause in the dialogue, all the “doctors” swirl around the stage in Leslie Bennett’s hilarious choreography, and sing praises of medicine (Viagra, Ex-Lax) to tunes that include “I’m a Jayhawk,” “Far above the golden valley,” “hava nagila”). The audience rocked. If it had gone on for one more minute they’d have been on their feet.

Throughout, Sandy Leppin’s beautiful set convincingly conveys 17th Century Versailles in its lush French blue and gold. Lavish costumes fill the stage, thanks to Shannon Smith-Regnier. Dennis Christilles’ lighting effectively signals mood changes in the play.

Dean Bevan