

## **‘misanthrope’ mocks self-righteousness**

Associated Press, 24 sep 07, Michael Kuchwara

**NEW YORK** Alceste, the aptly named title character in “The Misanthrope,” is a man possessed. So is Belgian avant-garde director Ivo van Hove – but in a good way. Van Hove has burnished an iconoclastic reputation at off-Broadway’s New York Theatre Workshop, deconstructing and turning inside-out the works of such diverse playwrights as Ibsen, O’Neill and Williams. Now it is Moliere’s turn.

The director has taken “The Misanthrope,” which opened Monday, and given it a time-traveling shake. He has yanked the play out of 17th-century France and set it in a modern-dress, totally connected yet self-absorbed world of cell phones, laptops and instant video of the YouTube variety. The result is a startlingly imaginative re-examination of a theater classic – outrageous and somehow exactly right at the same time.

Alceste, played here with relentless fury by Bill Camp, is a man of the highest standards. He is a critic of society for whom the words “compromise” and “accommodate” are nonexistent. The man is a seeker of truth, and the truth often hurts. More to the point, Alceste is willing to deliver the pain. Not for him the social niceties of small talk and smoothing over the flaws and foibles that are found in everyone.

Van Hove works closely with his production designer, Jan Versweyveld, creating, at first, a crisp, rectangular playing area that is almost antiseptic in its spareness. It doesn’t stay that way for long. Much of the disorder -- and onstage debris -- that follows comes from Alceste’s besotted relationship with the beautiful Celimene, portrayed with wily sexuality by Jeanine Serralles. Celimene champions social practicality. She is not above a little prevarication if it will get her what she wants. Alceste can’t get over her dissembling, and their sparring brings out the worst in each of them.

“All kinds of social chaos would ensue if everybody spoke his mind like you,” says best buddy Philinte (Thomas Jay Ryan) to Alceste. That chaos comes first as a serious food fight that has Alceste dousing himself with chocolate syrup, ketchup and a dab or two of mustard, among other things, as he busts up a stylish get-

together and rails against Celimene and her catty colleagues. Things get even more messy as the two lovers continue their battle right off the stage, past the audience and into the street, a journey that is tracked by onstage video screens. (The sequence outside is live, not taped.) Alceste's single-mindedness pursuit of Celimene is an obsession that turns the stage into a garbage dump.

It's Philinte and Eliante (Quincy Tyler Bernstine), Celimene's sweet cousin, who are the gentle voices of reason and politeness in the play, even if they do commit teeny social lies to keep the peace. More hypocritical is Arsinoe, who stridently oozes sanctimony, particularly in Amelia Campbell's robust performance.

Yet the real star of this striking production, which uses Tony Harrison's very British translation, is van Hove. The director forces us to re-examine "The Misanthrope" through the prism of our own time, and it works very well indeed. But then, puncturing self-righteousness never goes out of style.