

van hove's 'misanthrope' is all slathered in molière sauce

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Ivo van Hove, the radical reinterpreter of classics such as “Hedda Gabler” and “A Streetcar Named Desire,” is back at the New York Theatre Workshop, where his take on Molière’s “The Misanthrope” opened last night. The Flemish director’s production is bold, gripping, confounding and - if you’re near the stage - pungent enough to put you off barbecue.

Molière’s biting comedy centers on Alceste (Bill Camp), a man who hates dishonesty as much as he loves the lying and sexually manipulative Célimène (a tangy Jeanine Serralles). Moments after Alceste informs his friend Philinte (Thomas Jay Ryan) that he’ll never sugarcoat the truth, he tells his rival Oronte (Alfredo Narciso) that his poetry is “nauseating sprawl.” A lawsuit and other problems ensue.

Van Hove makes widespread use of video to have us see the story in fresh ways and to underscore the notion that people often are performing when they talk. Cameras record action onstage, backstage and, in an inspired moment, outside on the street. The images appear on screens on one wall of the stylish gray-box set that goes from sterile to garbage-strewn in the course of the play.

Videos aside, van Hove’s production is most memorable for a one-man food fight. Alceste is a man stewing in contempt for society and insincerity, and he shows that scorn by misbehaving and marinating himself in ketchup, chocolate syrup, melon and other edibles that leave a scent hanging in the air. It’s bizarre and fascinating all at once.

Other directorial decisions work less well. The story gets murky as some actors rush their lines and others holler theirs. The usually fine Amelia Campbell, who plays a frenemy of Célimène, is especially loud for no good reason. In the title role, Camp is funny, fiery and raucously physical. Even before he slathered himself with goop, he held me rapt with his dynamic voice. It shifts from a growl to silky purr whenever he talks of Célimène. That’s a special effect - no ketchup required.