

## no wonder he's cranky; he's covered in condiments

New York Times, 25 sep 07, Ben Brantley

**The edible look is all the rage — and I mean rage — in the fashionable circles of Paris this season. Head-to-toe layers of ketchup, chocolate syrup, watermelon pulp and crushed potato chips: This is just part of the wardrobe modeled in memorably high dudgeon by Bill Camp as the title character of “The Misanthrope.”**

In Ivo van Hove's wildly tossed salad of a production of Molière's greatest play, which opened last night at the New York Theater Workshop, Mr. Camp's character, the society-spurning Alceste, starts putting on the condiments after crashing (quite literally) a luncheon of gossiping poseurs, people he holds in bottomless contempt.

But if Alceste is applying his lunch externally to épater the aristos, he is also putting his insides on public display. The stench of his pain fills the air; it smells like ketchup and watermelon and chocolate. For the rest of the play, Alceste wears his food stains as if they were stigmata, and whenever he shows up onstage, you flinch for what he's feeling.

The Belgian-born Mr. van Hove, who specializes in dismantling theatrical classics, goes for the guts in his “Misanthrope,” turning Molière's overrefined hypocrites into a wallowing, rutting, howling menagerie of beasts.

Mr. van Hove has spoken of this interpretation as an indictment of the lonely “liquid society” of contemporary life, in which individuals are isolated from one another by technology. This production, designed with chic sterility by Jan Versweyveld, is chock-full of devices like cellphones, BlackBerrys, computer notebooks and digital cameras that simulcast the stage action onto windowlike screens.

But Mr. van Hove — whose previous New York Theater Workshop productions include a revved-up staging of Eugene O'Neill's behemoth “More Stately Mansions,” a bathtub-centered “Streetcar Named Desire” and, most recently, an acclaimed “Hedda Gabler” — throws on his techno accessories rather as Mr. Camp layers on the goopy foodstuffs. They never really penetrate the surface.

The evidence suggests that what truly fascinates Mr. van Hove is not how far humanity has evolved into robotic soullessness; it's how close it remains to its primitive roots. Or in the words of the poet Tony Harrison's jazzed-up new translation, which strains in aspiring to hipness: "There's your humanity. There's no escape./These are the antics of the naked ape."

There's a definite adrenaline rush in watching actors get as thoroughly down and dirty as Mr. van Hove's ensemble does, and in the case of the brilliant Mr. Camp, you receive a deeper, more disturbing emotional charge. But this monkey-house approach to Molière presents a fundamental problem.

If everybody is acting out, as well as on, his or her basest instincts, where's the friction between substance and surface? Subtract the superficial veneer of manners that counts for so much to Molière's characters, and you're left with only half of a dramatic equation.

Robert Wilson managed to convey both elements in depth in his stylized adaptation of fables by La Fontaine, Molière's contemporary, seen at the Lincoln Center Festival in July. But Mr. van Hove is not, in the final analysis, a conceptualist as Mr. Wilson is. He doesn't deconstruct. He detonates, and with the most basic of theatrical tools: the actors themselves.

For despite the expert work of Mr. van Hove's technical team, especially Tal Yarden, who did the often haunting video design, this "Misanthrope" feels less like a reflection of the age of the Internet than a throwback to the experimental theater of the 1960s, when the theories of elemental acting of Jerzy Grotowski and Antonin Artaud held sway.

This means that the ensemble members of "The Misanthrope," dressed in interchangeable uniforms of black pants and white shirts, consistently seek out their atavistic impulses. When people insult one another, speaking in the viciously oblique style of courtly rhymes, they segue into wrestling matches on the floor.

When they pitch woo, they writhe in copulative congress. When they're vexed or disappointed, they screech like babies deprived of their pacifiers. And for the play's concluding scenes, the stage is strewn with garbage, fetched from bags on the sidewalk outside the theater by Alceste. (A camera follows him, as if often does, so we can watch what goes on beyond the fourth wall.)

Bon mots are not made for shrieking, and many are lost here. Given the sometimes fallen archness of Mr. Harrison's translation, this is not always a bad thing. ("Anyone at all, the lowest of the low/gets 15 minutes on a TV show.")

The company's naked-soul acting is not without dividends. As the tart-tongued and duplicitous Célimène, Alceste's beloved, Jeanine Serralles finds an illuminating carnal neediness, as well as an infantile side that reminds us that her character is, as she keeps reminding us, only 20. Alfredo Narciso presents what may be the play's one genuinely contemporary portrait as the poet Oronte, whom he portrays as an earnest young social climber who doesn't understand when playing by the rules doesn't pay off.

And Mr. Camp, an Off Broadway veteran who just gets better every year, elicits a tragic dimension from Alceste, an Olympian agony and self-disgust that a more conventional production could not support. And while I don't think the video is thematically essential here, as it is with a troupe like the Wooster Group, it does make for a fascinating comparison of how performances register in different ways on the stage and on the screen.

Really, the value of this "Misanthrope" isn't unlike that of an acting exercise in which class members shed their inhibitions, get in touch with their darkest feelings and locate aspects of classic roles they might not otherwise discover. Usually this process involves another step, which translates those discoveries into more artfully detailed performances.

"I try to make an X-ray of a character," Mr. van Hove has said of his work, "to bring the subtext out where it can be seen." But to untrained eyes, X-rays can look awfully similar, since people tend to be pretty much the same beneath the skin. Mr. van Hove's naked apes would be more compelling with clothes.

## **THE MISANTHROPE**

By Molière, translated by Tony Harrison; directed by Ivo van Hove; production design by Jan Versweyveld; costumes by Emilio Sosa; sound by Raul Vincent Enriquez; video by Tal Yarden; production stage manager, Larry K. Ash. Presented by the New York Theater Workshop, James C. Nicola, artistic director; Lynn Moffat, managing director. At the New York Theater Workshop, 79 East Fourth Street, East Village; (212) 239-6200. Through Nov. 11. Running time: 1 hour 50 minutes. WITH: Quincy Tyler Bernstine (Eliante), Jason C. Brown (Clitandre), Bill Camp (Alceste), Amelia Campbell (Arsinoé), Joan MacIntosh (Acaste), Alfredo Narciso (Oronte), Thomas Jay Ryan (Philinte) and Jeanine Serralles (Célimène).