

the misanthrope

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Who would think that the most relevant scribe on the boards would turn out to be Moliere? But that's the way it plays, in Dutch director Ivo van Hove's boldly helmed production of "The Misanthrope." This killingly contempo version of the 17th century French comedy, translated and adapted by Tony Harrison, finds Moliere's brittle characters in ultra-chic modern dress and preening for the videocams recording their every vacant smile and cutting bon mot. Also immortalized is their habit of creating and rolling around in garbage -- an all-too-literal symbol for the filthy gossip and outright lies that poison the hearts of true lovers.

Based on such convention-defying productions as the 2004 Obie-winning "Hedda Gabler" (also at New York Theater Workshop), theatergoers have rightly come to expect outrageous things from van Hove. His iconoclastic vision kicks in here with a view of a modern world in which no one can (or apparently wants to) keep a secret.

The action is totally exposed in the wide-open playing field of Jan Versweyveld's daring stage design, a naked expanse of reflective walls, recessed lights, and sliding panels -- with a split-panel video screen overseeing it all with its giant eye. The characters can't even hide something in the folds of their clothes, which costumer Emilio Sosa renders as uniform black suits, with unisex white shirts and bare feet for all.

But everyone carries chirping cellphones and laptops on which they chatter away, industriously manufacturing and spreading the vicious gossip and outright lies that have had such an insidious effect on Alceste. In another yeoman perf from stalwart Bill Camp, Moliere's railing malcontent is frothing with virtuous rage at the aberrant behavior of his social set, who have corrupted everything of value in their world in order to entertain themselves.

Philinte (the soul of sanity in Thomas Jay Ryan's perfectly modulated perf) tries to reassure his friend people aren't as vile and vicious as they seem and virtue still exists in the world. But Alceste has grievances that can't be ignored; and, even as modified in Harrison's idiomatic translation from the stately French verse, Moliere's stinging diatribes against the hypocrisy of his -- and our -- times make you wince.

The paramount issues for Alceste are his pure love for the divine Celimene (Jeanine Serralles) and his fear she has been corrupted by the crowd. As played with knowing intelligence by Serralles and re-played in giant closeup on that video screen, this divinity is witty, clever, attractive and charming. But those demurring eyes of hers make it all too clear to Alceste she is not to be trusted when swearing either her loyalty to him or her profound disinterest in all her other suitors, male and female.

Although it's always a temptation to tune out on Alceste's incessant whining, van Hove's dynamic directorial style won't allow it. In this highly physicalized production verbal attacks and counterattacks are conducted with real violence. Even the love scenes between Alceste and Celimene involve much rolling around on the floor, and one of their fierce arguments leads to a bolt up the aisle and onto the street, where Alceste collects the raw materials for his rolling-in-garbage scene.

The filth metaphor is carried even further when the disgusted Alceste joins all those gossips and liars (the mesmerizing Joan Macintosh among them) to dish the dirt, so to speak, and winds up smearing himself in the juicy food and messy condiments they have brought to sustain them through their gab-fest. It's shocking and it's smelly, but as a metaphor, the gesture is entirely apt.