

## french tickler

**Ivo van Hove's Misanthrope really cuts the mustard**

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**In a scene early in *The Misanthrope*, Paris's chief wits gather around a table to sip, nibble, and gossip. Their favorite topic: maligning their confreres. One man they dismiss as *gauche*, another as garrulous. They describe a critic as "supercilious about new plays," one "who won't show praise/only idiots laugh and fools applaud:/the clever thing to be's blasé and bored." Perhaps I am an idiot (it has been suggested in the letters page), but I laughed, applauded, and will heap praise on Ivo van Hove's production of *The Misanthrope* at New York Theatre Workshop.**

As befits a Van Hove production, that scene of droll chat and raillery ends when Bill Camp's *Alceste*, the titular character, glides onto the table and begins to cover himself with the assembled snacks. Chocolate sauce for the face, ketchup for his chest, a baguette down his pants, whipped cream on his exposed cock. It's a perilously funny lesson in abjection – one the ribboned and bewigged Molière might just have dared dream, had the censors allowed it.

Audiences have likely seen other productions of *The Misanthrope* — or read the script at school — and know it as a prickly comedy that pits the persnickety *Alceste* against the hypocrisy of Parisian society. In earlier NYTW outings, like his steamy *Streetcar Named Desire* or his startling *Hedda Gabler*, Van Hove has reawakened classic plays. He strips away the patina of age and familiarity, revealing in even the best-known lines desire, cruelty, and no little danger. Without changing a word of the texts, Van Hove seems to rewrite them.

These techniques shouldn't work as well with Molière. Unlike the other playwrights that Van Hove has illumined — Williams, Ibsen, O'Neill — Molière is a satirist: The Frenchman's already aware of the unattractive habits and yens each of us conceals. Tony Harrison's spiky 1973 translation, still nicely current, further undoes the play's niceties — though no prude, Molière would likely not have described a line from an execrable poem as sounding, in Harrison's words, "like a bullfrog in the throes of sex." Yet Van Hove finds even more to reveal. Sometimes he achieves this by covering up — having Camp douse himself in edibles, instructing other characters to disappear behind cell phones or computer screens as they

speak. And sometimes Van Hove exposes everything, punching through the back wall to set a scene in a dressing room, or bursting through the theater doors to stage a fight in the street. (The smart design is courtesy of Van Hove's longtime collaborator, Jan Versweyveld.) Cameras follow the characters everywhere. No matter how they try to hide themselves, their own image pursues them.

Van Hove makes daring choices, but even when they chafe against Molière's script, they don't betray it. Why shouldn't the self-important Acaste (Joan MacIntosh) recite a speech while toying with her Second Life avatar? Why wouldn't Alceste wade through bags of garbage (poor Camp) while trying to grasp Célimène's betrayal? Most wonderful: Amid all the deceit and displeasure, Van Hove discovers and stages a legitimately happy ending — Camp's Alceste trips merrily away with Jeanine Serralles's tart Célimène. (What a gift that might have been to Molière, who played Alceste opposite his estranged wife and seemed to end the play with the couple at an impasse.)

The production surprises even in its thematic emphases. Much of the academic criticism of the play has centered on whether Molière wished us to side with Alceste or with his friend Philinte, who argues: "But in society (if we belong that is)/We must conform to its civilities." Every age has plumped for a different hero. Interestingly, for all his whipped cream and brashness, Van Hove's version sides with conventional morality, with Thomas Jay Ryan's kind Philinte who declares, "Moderation's where true wisdom lies." Philinte's argument is fairly unassailable, but thank God for immoderate directors.