

Revision Quests

The question," as Humpty Dumpty said, "is which is to be master." In the program for *More Stately Mansions*, the playwright's name is merely the first on a list of participants; the director's is set off by itself. At *Naked Revolution*, the program cover credits the librettist and composer along with the creators of the "artistic concept," Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid; to find the director's name, you have to look inside, where there's a longer credit list. Perhaps not surprisingly, Ivo van Hove's staging of the O'Neill play is aggressive, precise, showy, a dismantling of the text that means to expose its inner workings to the audience; David Herskovits's staging of the opera is slovenly, drab, and perfunctory, as if his imagination were on strike for better billing. This doesn't mean the thumbs are all up on East 4th Street and down on West 19th; on the contrary, van Hove's interventionist tactics are likely to excite more anger than applause, while Herskovits's nonstarter approach may be accepted, or even lauded, in a realm where directors aren't usually seen as the prime movers. It all depends on which world thinks who's in charge.

The notion that directors rule, that the play is demonstrably not the thing, came to our hipper Downtown theaters by way of Europe (though Broadway always had a version of it, in the form of "play doctors"). Sometime in the 1980s, it began to merge with literary theories then gaining prominence, to produce the peculiar mode of theater, now fairly common, in which the play and the director's vision are less a fusion than a pair of chance acquaintances that don't interact so much as go about their glum private business, now and then colliding with each other by chance. The most suspenseful dramatic question involved, usually, is why any audience should want to sit through the result.

On the other hand, an even bigger question is why anyone would want to sit through a performance of *More Stately Mansions* not enlivened by some subversive dismantling procedure. Written in 1938-39, midway through O'Neill's tormented trip from *Ah, Wilderness!* to *Long Day's Journey*, *Mansions* is a word-bloated rough draft of what was meant to be either the fourth or the sixth item in a 9- or 11-play cycle. O'Neill left instructions for it to be destroyed at his death; it only survives because it was included by mistake when his papers were shipped to Yale. After the posthumous triumph of *Long Day's Journey*, O'Neill's widow gave the Royal Dramatic Theatre of Sweden permission to stage this leftover, and Karl Ragnar Gierow prepared an acting version roughly half the length of the surviv-

More Stately Mansions

By Eugene O'Neill
New York Theatre Workshop
71 East 4th Street
460-9467

Naked Revolution
By Dave Soldier and Malta di Niscemi
The Kitchen
521 West 19th Street
255-5793

BY MICHAEL FEINGOLD

ing typescript. (An unhappy 1967 Broadway staging used a different version by its director, José Quintero.)

The cycle was meant to survey American life from the Revolution to

tionality, as Simon cedes control of his business to Sara, they strip naked and engage in a bout of what's meant to imply intercourse but looks more like Greco-Roman wrestling.

Van Hove's method is brutal and dismissive, but—barring excesses like the nude pas de deux—never foolish. Going at the text as a set of assertions to be queried, he at least turns this embryonic blob of drama into a show. His querulous reduction of every moment to its Freudianized inner essence, though it splinters away any pretense of coherence, perversely ends by making you see, if not the drama this was

Van Hove's three principals, extraordinarily brave souls, take every kind of risk for him, stripping their roles of psychological unity as well as clothing. Only Tim Hopper, as Simon, has found a way to balance the role O'Neill imagined with van Hove's annotations on it, so that we see a single person continuing from fragment to contradictory fragment. Joan McIntosh is impressive, as always, but what we see is Joan McIntosh being impressive, not Deborah. Jenny Bacon, the Sara, is impressively at ease, even nude, but she has the vocal weakness of her film-bred generation: when she shouts—van Hove has Sara shout a lot—it's merely grating. Still, she and McIntosh get points for passion and sheer grit; the results van Hove would get with less gifted artists one can only shudder to imagine.

Not that gifted performers are a defense against the mode's creeping apathy. The cast of *Naked Revolution* is full of them: plucky, lustrous-voiced Dina Emerson; the tall, grandly comic basso Robert Osborne; impish Tony Boutté, who sends out ringing tenor tones while spinning on roller skates. To top it all off, there's the unearthly beauty of Oleg Riabets's male soprano. But then there's the work.

Komar and Melamid, émigrés from Russia when it was still Soviet, are famous for paintings that wittily subvert political iconography. Matching them with composer Dave Soldier, whose eclecticism is analogously subversive, was an

excellent idea. And the two Russians' scenario, which muddles Lenin and George Washington with statues of themselves, the Czar, and George III—plus Molly Pitcher and Duchamp—has possibilities both puckish and mordant.

But an opera needs words, and *Naked Revolution* has "Text and Libretto by" Maita di Niscemi, whose ineptitude in English (apparently not her first language) thus begins with her credit. If Soldier's word-setting is sometimes awkward, it may be because he had so many awkward, flat, false-rhymed lines to choose from. Libretto writing is a poet's job. (The right poet for this one was Kenneth Koch.) Then, an artist with van Hove's purposiveness might have staged the piece effectively. Komar and Melamid wouldn't think of showing a canvas this weakly composed. For all its strengths—Soldier's handling of the central Russian sequences was especially impressive—the work is scarred all through by Downtown self-indulgence. If K&M actually want to create stage works, they will have to become, or put themselves in the hands of, people with a sense of theater. Somebody has to be in charge—ironic news, I know, for artists whose work is based on the corruption inherent in power, but true even so; Humpty Dumpty's question still applies. ▀



Floored by (stage) business: Jenny Bacon and Tim Hopper in *More Stately Mansions*

the present, *More Stately Mansions* is set in the industrializing New England of the 1840s. In a welter of shifting emotions, Simon Harford, scion of mercantile gentry, evolves from Comtean idealist to grasping tycoon to gibbering, infantilized failure, as he gets increasingly tangled in the tug-of-war between his neurotically manipulative mother and his stop-at-nothing, shanty-Irish wife—an escapee from the squalid tavern of the cycle's preceding play, *A Touch of the Poet*. While mother Deborah and wife Sara battle over Simon, he makes his fortune by wrecking other men's, enlisting the even less scrupulous Sara to keep her and Deborah apart. But in compartmentalizing his life, he wrecks it: Grasping Sara takes over the business, while Deborah and Simon retreat into an oedipal fantasy that kills her and sends him into delirium.

Discarding any pretense of realism, van Hove stages this morass of half-sorted motifs as a cross between a ballet and a set of Rorschach blots. The actors rattle off O'Neill's words in carefully unmodulated leaps from hysterical shout to sullen mutter to goo-goo baby talk, while engaging in such arbitrary (but often astutely selected) maneuvers as crawling on all fours and rubbing noses. At the peak of irra-

meant to be, at least the hidden drives that made O'Neill need to write it. Van Hove might be taking as his premise Stark Young's famous comment that what moved him about O'Neill was never the work itself but "the cost to the dramatist of what he handled." Turning this hunk of half-baked roast beef into postmodern hash, van Hove shows you how much the man's slow-cooking process cost him. Few great dramatists have written as much crap as O'Neill; fewer still have had to struggle so to reach and sustain their greatness.

Even so, it's an open question whether audiences go to the theater to see a play taken apart before their eyes, however inventively. The problem with all of postmodernism's tactics is their reductiveness. They tend to take out of an old work whatever pleasures its makers had carefully worked in, without adding any new pleasures of their own. The tactics used long predate the theories, but in the past they were used to set up a dynamic tension with the work, not to shatter it. Postmodernism's hardest on actors, whose bodies and voices are, after all, the substance of what happens on the stage. Putting your whole self at the service of an artist's vision can lead to transcendence; letting yourself be used as a pawn in a pointless game is another matter.