

THE THEATRE

# DEVIL IN THE FLESH

*Arthur Miller and Noël Coward on acting out.*

BY JOHN LAHR



When Catherine falls in love with one of the two illegal immigrants that they put up—cousins from the Old Country—Eddie’s only way to keep her from getting married is to report the cousins to the Immigration Bureau. By dropping the dime, Eddie betrays his wife, his niece, his relatives, himself, and, by extension, his entire tribe. The story’s symmetry is elemental and terrifying; it hurtles to its conclusion, propelled by Schreiber’s uncanny, incandescent performance.

Saturnine and strapping, Eddie enters in a cloth cap and an overcoat as rumpled as the world he inhabits. He is driven by feelings that he can neither fathom nor control, and which he hides beneath a show of paternal concern. “Listen, you been givin’ me the willies the way you walk down the street, I mean it,” he tells his curvaceous niece, taking in her hourglass figure from the comfort of his easy chair. “Catherine, I don’t want to be a pest, but I’m tellin’ you you’re walkin’ wavy.” Of the many gifts that Schreiber brings to the role—a swift mind, a pitch-perfect ear for the sludge of the demotic, a reservoir of restrained aggression, an ability to listen—the most important, it seems to me, is a sense of his own unresolved nature, an inchoate longing that makes him a perfect emotional fit for Eddie. There’s a loneliness and an agitation in Schreiber that are at odds with his technical command; this combination of fragility and force makes him seem both mysterious and dangerous, and therefore compelling to watch.

As Catherine, Johansson is a superb object for Schreiber’s ambivalent desire. In a robin’s-egg-blue sweater and a form-fitting gray skirt, she glows with ripeness and an alertness to life. The top student in her high-school graduating class, Catherine, in the opening scene, gets word that she has been offered a fifty-dollar-a-week job at a local plumbing company. Eddie, who has bigger dreams for her, balks at the idea, before finally conceding. “You wanna go to work, heh, Madonna?” he says. “All right, go to work.” Tearfully, Catherine throws herself into his arms, then bustles happily around the threadbare apartment. “I’m gonna buy all new dishes with my first pay!” she says. Catherine’s world is opening up; Eddie’s is

The revival of Arthur Miller’s 1955 play “A View from the Bridge” (defly directed by Gregory Mosher, at the Cort) is a singular astonishment: a kind of theatrical lightning bolt that sizzles and startles at the same time, illuminating the poetry in the play’s prose and the subtlety in its streamlined construction. “A View from the Bridge” may not be Miller’s best play, but this is one of the best productions of his work that I’ve ever seen.

In John Lee Beatty’s moody set, the action emerges from the chilly shadows of the brown warrens of Red Hook, a working-class Italian enclave on the sea-

ward side of the Brooklyn Bridge. “This is the gullet of New York swallowing the tonnage of the world,” Alfieri (the compelling Michael Cristofer), a lawyer, who serves as a kind of chorus for the tragic tale, says at the opening. He adds, “I am inclined to notice the ruins in things, perhaps because I was born in Italy.” The ruin in question is the longshoreman Eddie Carbone (Liev Schreiber), a palooka with no purchase on language or on his own psyche, who is destroyed by his unexamined desire for his teen-age niece, Catherine (Scarlett Johansson), whom he and his wife, Beatrice (Jessica Hecht), have raised.

*Scarlett Johansson and Liev Schreiber. Photograph by Francesco Carrozzini.*

closing down. Onstage, Johansson is more resourceful than most of her film roles have allowed her to be; her face is a detailed map of Catherine's internal climate—her loyalty, her gratitude, her eagerness, her rebelliousness against Eddie's petty tyrannies, and her insistence on her own desires, in particular for the happy-go-lucky blond cousin, Rodolpho (the excellent Morgan Spector), whom Eddie thinks is "a weird," because he sings, cooks, and sews.

"You married too?" Catherine asks Rodolpho when he arrives with his brother, Marco (Corey Stoll), a family man with three children to feed. "I have no money to get married. I have a nice face, but no money," Rodolpho says, laughing. By the time he has finished singing a jazz version of "Paper Doll"—"Leave him finish, it's beautiful," Catherine says when Eddie tries to interrupt—Catherine is under his spell. At a stroke, she is claimed by romance and Eddie by envy: when he first goes to see Alfieri about putting a stop to the relationship, he claims he's been robbed ("He . . . puts his dirty filthy hands on her like a goddam thief"). "I'm tryin' to bring out my thoughts here," Eddie tells Alfieri. In fact, everything in this ravishing production demonstrates the opposite: Eddie staunchly refuses to think. All the negative is projected into other people. Drunk at Christmas, Eddie arrives home to find Rodolpho coming out of Catherine's bedroom. In an electrifying moment—superbly staged by Mosher—the two men lunge at each other. Schreiber seems to throw the full weight of his melancholy into the tackle, which sends them sprawling across the kitchen table. In front of Catherine, Eddie plants a taunting kiss on Rodolpho's lips. As Catherine tries to pull him away, Eddie grabs her and kisses her hard on the mouth. The horror of the scene is immediately erased from Eddie's mind by the sound of his own righteousness. "Don't lay another hand on her unless you wanna go out feet first," he says to Rodolpho as he exits. Even at the finale, when Eddie faces off against Marco, who is being deported, he insists on his honor. "Wipin' the neighborhood with my name like a dirty rag! I want my name, Marco," he says.

"Something perversely pure calls to

me from his memory," Alfieri says of Eddie in an elegiac epilogue. "Not purely good, but himself purely, for he allowed himself to be wholly known." In both style and content, this weasel-worded speech seems to contradict the play: Eddie never allows himself to be known; he hides even from himself. So what is going on? About whom is Miller speaking? Miller had heard the Carbone story from a longshoreman around 1950, when he was writing a screenplay about the waterfront for Elia Kazan—which he withdrew from production in 1951, as the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings loomed. (Kazan testified, controversially, as a friendly witness.) Miller thought of that murky first draft as a "probe"; he entitled it "An Italian Tragedy" and put it away. By the time he came back to the story, in 1955, he had fallen in love with Marilyn Monroe, whom he would soon marry; he was in the process of divorcing his wife of sixteen years and breaking up their family. He was, he said, in "psychological country strange to me, ugly and forbidding." Betrayal had become part of Miller's story, as well as Kazan's. In his movie "On the Waterfront" (1954), Kazan attempted to justify his decision to testify by depicting an informer as a heroic victim of systemic corruption. "A View from the Bridge," by contrast, depicts the informer as a deluded victimizer. "It would have been nice if Art, at this moment, while expressing the strong disapproval he felt, had acknowledged some past friendship—or even written me a few words, however condemnatory," Kazan, who had directed the Broadway productions of Miller's "All My Sons" and "Death of a Salesman," wrote in his autobiography. Instead, it seems to me, Miller replied to Kazan from the stage. Alfieri's ambivalent envoi is a rueful way of forgiving Kazan his trespasses, and, by extension, allowing Miller to forgive himself his own. "And so I mourn him—I admit it—with a certain . . . alarm," Alfieri says as the curtain falls.

Where Eddie Carbone is a figure of odium, Garry Essendine, the matinée idol at the center of Noël Coward's classic light comedy "Present Laughter" (a Roundabout Theatre

Company production, at the American Airlines), is a figure of adoration. "Everybody worships me, it's nauseating," Essendine (the expert Victor Garber) says, descending in a silk dressing gown into a living room that looks like the Art Deco lobby of the Savoy. Essendine is a charm machine, trapped in the perpetual performance of his public self. "I'm always acting—watching myself go by," he says. Through Essendine, Coward teases his own public persona and works its magic at the same time. The play sets up a series of challenges for Essendine's equanimity, the most testing of which is the appearance at his door of an uncouth critic and would-be playwright, the well-named Roland Maule (Brooks Ashmanskas). "All you do with your talent is wear dressing-gowns and make witty remarks when you might be really helping people, making them think! Making them feel," the jittery critic says. But no sooner has Essendine doled out one of Coward's famous "finger wags" than Maule, too, falls under Essendine's spell. "You're wonderful!" he says. Ashmanskas deserves some kind of award for scene-stealing—he postures, minces, sprawls, and caroms around the stage like a human pinball. His lampoon, however, is entirely out of keeping with the satire. "Every moment I'm near him I get smoother and smoother," Maule says, though, from first entrance to last, there is no transformation in Ashmanskas's zany behavior.

The director, Nicholas Martin, who is good at comedy, should have known better. He has brought together an excellent ensemble and a handsome set by Alexander Dodge, but he has somehow lost faith in Coward's underlying argument. For Coward, wit was an act of non-friction, an enchantment that allowed him to evade scrutiny. All Coward's major comedies end in escape; the protagonists tiptoe away from chaos. This happens in "Hay Fever," "Private Lives," and "Blithe Spirit," as well as in "Present Laughter." Not, however, in the Roundabout's production, where the cast ambles offstage only to return for a sing-along of "I'll See You Again." Coward's ending is inspired comedy; Martin's is sentimental claptrap. ♦