

THE THEATRE

STIR CRAZY

Delusions in Adam Rapp, Nikolai Gogol, and the Wooster Group.

BY JOHN LAHR



Cast members of Adam Rapp's "Hallway Trilogy." Photograph by Brian Finke.

The linoleum-lined third-floor hallway of a dilapidated Lower East Side tenement building is the arena in which the solitary inhabitants of four apartments act out their madness in Adam Rapp's ambitious "Hallway Trilogy" (at the Rattlestick). We've all trudged up scuffed stairs like these, smelled the odor of disinfectant, and knocked on similarly scratched doors, but few of us have encountered an upright piano in the hallway. I bet no one has. In Rapp's trilogy, however, the piano stays more or less in place, as the people and the space around it change over the decades. (The three plays are set in 1953, 2003, and 2053.) It's a measure of Rapp's skill as a storyteller that he makes the audience believe in such

improbabilities—and turns them into insinuating dramatic events. In these mostly well-told tales, the piano is, respectively, a barrier blocking entry to a condemned apartment, a sexual provocation, and, finally, a symbol of the sad, sour, forgotten music of other times. In the course of the three plays, the hallway becomes a collective purgatory of sorts, a public space that contains the detritus of private lives—all the wounded, selfish flotsam and jetsam who have washed up between its walls. The story those walls tell is that of the breakdown of charity.

In "Rose" (directed by Rapp), the first and weakest play of the trio, the retreat from community is a comic immanence, which seems almost incidental to the an-

tics of a mean-spirited superintendent inside the building, the anti-Communist rumblings outside it, and the chaotic, isolated high jinks of a Harpo-like nonverbal poltergeist called Marbles. By the time we get to the second play, "Paraffin" (slickly directed by Daniel Aukin), drugs and the blowback from America's foreign wars have unmoored the building's tenants and made them more cruel, dangerous, and barbarous. An antisocial nadir is reached in the disease-free, post-nuclear world of "Nursing" (cleverly directed by Trip Cullman), in which the hallway has been transformed into a glass-enclosed living museum, an architectural novelty through the windows of which the public can watch a volunteer victim suffer the grievous pain of now eradicated diseases. Under the helmeted gaze of an armed guard, we, as the futuristic voyeurs, get the extra bonus of witnessing what caring—that "antiquated profession," according to our tour guide—used to be like.

Rapp, who played semiprofessional basketball in Europe as a young man, has, as they say in the vernacular of the sport, some terrific moves: he's swift, he can change pace, he can get inside your head, and, although he sometimes telegraphs his intention, he takes you on and keeps you off balance. In "Paraffin," for instance, a Polish thug named Leshik (Nick Lawson) comes to collect a long-overdue debt from Denny (William Apps), a feckless junkie who lives in No. 8; Denny is nowhere to be found, so instead Leshik leaves a message with Dena (Sue Jean Kim), an attractive Korean-Polish friend of Denny's family, threatening very serious bodily harm. "He will be hunted like wild boar and stabbed many times with screwdriver and then Balboa and his Rottweiler-style dog, Larry Johnson, will fuck him in these holes with their penis erections," Leshik explains calmly, insisting that Dena memorize the urgent message. "And don't forget ferret," Leshik says. "Does the ferret have a name?" Dena asks. "No," Leshik says. "But he have syphilis."

Of the three plays, "Nursing" is the boldest and the most unsettling. Here cancer has been cured and all enemies reduced to ash, and life is devoted to scientifically enhanced longevity. The only threat to the social order is a group

of anarchists, who are plotting to reinfect society, so that mankind “may not only fully know pain and suffering, but also its converse: joy,” as one handbill puts it. The production sells this fantasy with uncompromising gusto. (Each audience member is given a medical mask “in case of emergency.”) The trope of the play is that we get to watch Lloyd Boyd (the compelling Logan Marshall-Green) suffer and survive the torments of the bubonic plague, cholera, and black frost; he, however, can’t see or hear us. Boyd, a former military man with a lot of blood on his hands, is a captivating human specimen under glass, a twenty-first-century Hunger Artist in a high-tech cage. The medical spectacle is graphic and grisly, but the horror of illness is somehow mesmerizing. To the media, Lloyd Boyd is an inspirational figure of recovery; to himself, he is a figure of contempt. He wants only to die. Joan (the excellent Maria Dizzia), one of his two nurses, turns out to be both an anarchist who has infiltrated the system and his angel of death. Rapp leaves the audience with a bracing thought that links, in my mind, medical infection with intellectual contagion. “As I hurl myself into your arms and give you this beautiful, perfect plague, will you still love me?” Joan asks, looking directly at us. “Will you?”

Nobody loves the prickly, supercilious, gangly, red-headed Aksentii Poprishchin (the brilliant Geoffrey Rush), in Nikolai Gogol’s “The Diary of a Madman” (exquisitely directed by Neil Armfeld from the elegant stage adaptation by David Holman, at BAM). Poprishchin is a low-ranking civil servant in nineteenth-century St. Petersburg, and the most unreliable of narrators. He is a clownish snob, full of vainglorious gas and murderous envy, which he vents in his diary in bouts of lacerating pique. His gamine Finnish maid, Tuovi (the resourceful and charming Yael Stone), to whom he teaches Russian, is a “foreign idiot”; his boss is “the dwarf,” a “baboon,” and a “fat maggot,” and his co-workers “nobodies.” Fancying himself a gentleman and mortified by his circumstances, Poprishchin is driven crazy by invidious comparison. He takes refuge in the swagger of his splenetic punctilio, which imposes a sense of command on a life that is transparently hapless. But

his ungainly, pale body subverts every aspiration to poise: he staggers around his room like a marionette, his long hands flapping at his sides.

Rush’s performance is a series of wonderful protean transformations. During the course of the evening, as his desperation increases, Poprishchin becomes a gobbling turkey, a baboon, a peacock, a dog, and, finally, on “April 43rd,” King Ferdinand of Spain, underscoring his royal signature with a Baroque flourish. But, in all of Poprishchin’s delusional adventures, nothing is funnier than his attempt to snoop on his beloved Sophia, the daughter of the director of his department, listening to the conversation of her dog, Medji, and another, named Fifi, whose “letters” he manages to steal. In one of these “scented” notes—fouled paper snatched from their litter box—Medji writes about a lovely whippet who is courting her: “Ohh, ma chère, if you could see his little snout!” Poprishchin looks away in disgust. “What unadulterated rubbish,” he bleats. “How can she go on and on with such bilge.” He adds, speaking to the letter, “Give me a human being. Food for my soul, please!”

“The Diary of a Madman” is a thrilling exhibition of stagecraft, character, and the psychology of madness. It’s a kind of kinetic poem. If you wanted to compare the Wooster Group’s revival of Tennessee Williams’s “Vieux Carré” (at the Baryshnikov Arts Center) to a poem, I guess it would be Alexander Pope’s “Dunciad,” in which “thy dread empire, Chaos! is restored.”

“Vieux Carré” is a memory play, a well-wrought sequel to “The Glass Menagerie,” but without its lyrical shellac. “Vieux Carré” picks up Williams’s romantic myth at the point of his arrival at a New Orleans boarding house at the age of twenty-seven, having at last severed the apron strings that tied him to his toxic mother. (722 Toulouse Street is the spot where Williams’s “mad pilgrimage of the flesh”—and his drama—really began.) “The Glass Menagerie” was written, in 1943–44, with buoyancy and a sense of becoming; “Vieux Carré,” Williams’s penultimate Broadway production, which ran for only five performances, was written, in 1977, with a rueful sense of decline and an awareness of the emotional price that its author had paid to sustain his lit-

erary powers in the intervening decades. “You know you’re going to grow into a selfish, callous man. Returning no visits, reciprocating no . . . caring,” another boarding-house resident tells the Writer, who records the palaver of his disappointed and demented neighbors in short, cross-cut scenes. In “Menagerie,” Williams is haunted by ghosts that he has the power to control and to transform into beauty. In “Vieux Carré,” nearly the entire population of his spooked imagination is spectral: full of echoes, shadows, whispers, “fading but remembered,” in his ongoing argument with himself.

The Wooster Group’s lurid, brutalist, willfully tone-deaf staging is the dramatic equivalent of hip-hop scratching; it performs Williams’s song verbatim but entirely misses its melody. The production’s noisy verbal and visual fragments amount to a technology-infatuated collection of refusals: a refusal of language, nuance, psychology, beauty, emotion, and, finally, sense. The Writer’s tubercular neighbor swaggers around the stage with a dildo poking out of his robe; Nursie, the black maid, is a Valley Girl amid images of Aunt Jemima; the cluttered set looks more like a crack house than like a boarding house. The Wooster Group’s “Vieux Carré” is not Williams’s play; it’s just a way of playing around with Williams, channel-surfing his imagination. The self-indulgence of its relentless vulgarity tells you everything you need to know about the Wooster Group, and almost nothing you need to know about Williams.

Occasionally, the director, Elizabeth LeCompte, stumbles upon something that resonates. As the lonely Writer sobs in his bedroom, apparently over the death of his grandmother, an image of men fellating each other plays on TV screens positioned on scaffolding around the theatre: this reads as a fleeting but apt unconscious thought. The actors’ uninflected, rapid-fire delivery also suggests, although it doesn’t illuminate, the hysteria that is at the core of Williams’s lament. The evening’s most striking effect is watching the Writer bash away at his computer keyboard while Williams’s actual words are projected in spurts onto the back wall of the stage: a moment of clarity in the maelstrom of mess. One of the projected lines reads, “Exposition! Shit!” You can say that again. ♦