

## VILE BODIES

*Terence Rattigan and Adam Rapp on the filthy rich.*

BY JOHN LAHR

For the nearly two decades between his first hit, “French Without Tears” (1936), and his 1954 play “Separate Tables,” Terence Rattigan was the West End’s most successful playwright: according to Geoffrey Wansell’s 1995 biography, two of his plays ran for more than a thousand performances, three were performed more than five hundred times, and for almost five years, in the forties, he had three plays running in adjacent theatres on Shaftesbury Avenue. Rattigan wrote for what he called “Aunt Edna”—a middle-class audience with conventional tastes. “Aunt Edna enjoys being mystified, but she loathes being baffled,” he said, adding that she was part of the audience “for which true theatre exists and has always existed.”

Rattigan believed that a playwright owed the audience a well-told story; for his conservative ambition to entertain, the Young Turks of the New Wave of British theatre put his feet to the fire. “I am an unfashionable word,” he told the *Daily Express* in 1963, just before rehearsals of his new play “Man and Boy” began. “Continually I am reading articles about the need to demolish the old theatre—and blow up Coward and Rattigan. . . . I don’t dig that at all. I can’t write a bit like Osborne and Wesker. I can’t because you see I’ve grown up.” The New Wave was a tsunami that wiped Rattigan out. The critics “despised him with a scorn almost incredible in its ferocity,” Harold Hobson, the London *Times* drama critic, noted. Leading the bloodthirsty charge for the new guard was Kenneth Tynan, a recent convert, who dubbed Rattigan “the bathtub baritone of the drama.” “Why pick on me?” Rattigan asked Tynan, unable to fathom how deeply the welfare state’s working-class ethos had altered the British imagination: his persona, not just his plays, was being kicked into the long grass.

Throughout his life, Rattigan cut a pukka establishment figure: Harrow, Trinity College, Oxford, bespoke Savile

Row suits, Rolls-Royce, the Savoy, knighthood. With his mask of swank equipoise, he embodied the good form that his characters dramatized onstage. But, at a time when homosexuality was still a criminal offense in Britain, Rattigan was also a closeted gay man. For him and for his characters, masquerade was the central existential issue. “Do you know what ‘*le vice Anglais*’ is?” Rattigan wrote. “Not flagellation, not pederasty. . . . It’s our refusal to admit our emotion.” Repression was his subject and his theatrical style. “It is the implicit, rather than the explicit, that gives life to a scene,” he said. The main problem in playwriting, he added, was “what *not* to have your actors say, and how best *not* to have them say it.”

“Man and Boy” (in revival at the Roundabout’s American Airlines Theatre, under the sure hand of Maria Aitken) was Rattigan’s Hail Mary pass to win back his legendary stature. The play chronicles the financial collapse of a world-renowned business kingpin, a decline that serves as a simulacrum of Rattigan’s own fall from grace. Gregor Antonescu (Frank Langella), a Romanian financier who is known to the press as the “Saviour and mystery man of Europe” and to himself as “The Man,” is about to lose his empire and his glory. Wanted by the Bank of the City of London, the F.B.I., and the N.Y.P.D., the desperate Gregor has one last card to play, a con that may save both his name and Western capitalism. (The character was based on Ivar Kreuger, the Swedish “Match King” of the thirties, whom John Kenneth Galbraith dubbed “the Leonardo of larcenists,” but these days his Ponzi scheme brings Bernie Madoff vividly to mind.)

As the suave, sleep-starved psychopath who, we are told, begged as a child on the streets of Bucharest, Langella is sensational. Tall, lean, and still as a snake, he exists in a riveting solitude that reads as both authority and threat; the role fits his particular grandiosity. In his long fingers, a

cigarette becomes a sceptre, a flick of the wrist a semaphore of desire. By turns imperious and unctuous—"My dear Thornton. How good to hear your voice," he coos into the phone to a gullible investor—Langella manages to portray Gregor as a man who would steal your stove and then come back for the smoke. "Love is a commodity I can't afford," he says.

When Gregor's merger with the company of a gay industrialist, Mark Harries (Zach Grenier), seems about to go south, he calls on his illegitimate son (the excellent Adam Driver)—who hasn't spoken to him for five years and, in his rebellion, has changed his name from Vassily to Basil and moved to New York. In order to buy himself some time, Gregor arranges to meet Harries at Basil's Greenwich Village apartment. He then tosses his son into the scam like a poker chip into a high-stakes game: to win Harries over, he pretends that Basil is his lover and available for loan. Gregor, who costumes his son and adjusts the lighting and the furniture, is essentially staging a play. Sven (Michael Sibbery), Gregor's factotum, points out the recklessness of his maneuver. "But, Sven, what fun!" Gregor says. When Basil finally realizes that he's been used, he storms out. "You are nothing. You live and breathe and have being and you are my father—but you are nothing!"

he says in his parting shot, and he's right. Gregor is shrewd enough to recognize that his angry son still loves him, but not brave enough to acknowledge his own love for his son. "I will take any risk," he confides to Sven, "but not the risk of being so close to the pure in heart."

The refusal of love, not the loss of it, is the issue lurking beneath Rattigan's melodramatic hubbub. Both Basil's fury and Gregor's detachment are shown as defenses against unmaning vulnerability. Intimacy is the threat that Rattigan spelled out in his script, whose autobiographical echoes have, unfortunately, been pared from Aitken's version. "Dan-

ger to me, to my way of life, to my universe," Gregor says to Sven. "The whole world can hero-worship me. . . . But to be loved and worshipped by one's own boy . . . Oh, no." At the finale, ruined, Gregor heads out into the night with a loaded gun, never having admitted his love. "Gregor's last victory," Rattigan called this scene in his notebook. "A barren one, but at least he remains true to his

bow ties, and blazers are provoked to expose the venality beneath their smug façade of perfection.

Rapp revels in the high-camp lingo of the pampered: he gives many of his best lines to the "sexy, cut-throat" Sandra Cabot (the terrific Christine Lahti), who regales her guest Dirk Von Stofenberg (Cotter Smith), an old Yale friend of her husband, Bertram (Reed Birney), with

stories of the wretched people of Borneo, whom she and Bertram encountered on their honeymoon. "They practically surrounded us, Dirk. It was as though they wanted to put us in a stew," she says. "I screamed, 'BACK OFF, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF BORNEO! BACK OFF WITH YOUR SMALL UNDERDEVELOPED HANDS AND SWOLLEN STOMACHS!! BACK THE FUCK OFF!'" Sandra has eyes for Dirk, and, when Bertram goes to inspect the Canadian geese he is thinking of poisoning so that they won't ruin the lawn, she makes her move. "Have you ever fantasized about making love to me, yes or no?" she asks the buttoned-down Dirk, who prefers the euphemism "fudge" to "fuck." "In what positions? Missionary? Doggy style? Tractor-trailer? The two-headed hobgoblin?" Dirk plumps for doggy. No sooner are the words out of his mouth than Sandra adds, "Dirk, I'd like you to help me kill my husband." From that

point on, the characters and the audience are in the land of no-holds-barred. In one scene, the Cabots' left-wing, agoraphobic daughter, Cora (Katherine Waterston), gets it on with Dirk's suicidal son, James (Shane McRae), on the dining-room table, as Wilma (Quincy Tyler Bernstine), the black maid, tries to clear off the goose. (Despite Pepe's clumsy orchestration, the scene is hilarious.) Rapp's play doesn't quite sustain its wild ride, but its images haunt the mind. When the diners finally file out, the corpse of a chained lion is sprawled across the table. Why? And how did it get there? It's well worth the price of admission to find out. ♦



Adam Driver and Frank Langella as Rattigan's "Man and Boy."

own inhumanity." Barren? It's perverse! Gregor, like Rattigan, is trapped in his malignant masquerade to the end.

If "Man and Boy" is a disguised portrait of self-loathing, there's nothing hidden about Adam Rapp's gleeful disgust in "Dreams of Flying Dreams of Falling" (directed by Neil Pepe, for the Atlantic Theatre Company, at the Classic Stage Company). This fierce little play, which might be subtitled "The Discreet Charm of the Aristocracy," lets rapacity rip. Here, around a mahogany dining table set for eight, members of the preppy suburban Connecticut world of white bucks,