

A TALENT TO ABUSE

Two comedies of bad manners.

BY JOHN LAHR



Alan Rickman is the go-to actor for supercilious. Over the years, in screen roles as various as the Sheriff of Nottingham in “Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves,” Colonel Brandon in “Sense and Sensibility,” Hans Gruber in “Die Hard,” and Severus Snape in the “Harry Potter” franchise, Rickman has given contempt more complex angles than a Cubist painting. His unhurried hubris earned him the ranking of forty-sixth-best villain in film history in a recent American Film Institute panel. Onstage, however, as far as I am concerned, Rickman is No. 1. There is nothing quite like being in the presence of his

cool, ironic hauteur, which is at once dangerous and delightful.

In Theresa Rebeck’s slick and satisfying comedy “Seminar” (expertly directed by Sam Gold, at the Golden), Rickman is Leonard, a writer and editor with a somewhat checkered reputation, who, for the hefty fee of five thousand dollars a head, is giving a group of wannabe young writers the benefit of his bile. “You got to understand that this is a totally irrelevant dream state you’re hibernating in up here,” Leonard says for openers, biting the hands that have gathered to overfeed him. The story he is talking about was written by

Kate (the excellent Lily Rabe), who has organized the class in her spacious rent-controlled Upper West Side apartment (“We have nine rooms! And you can only see the river from two of them,” she says). Her tale begins with a self-conscious reworking of Jane Austen: “When truth is acknowledged universally it is also universally disdained.” “I mean, what the fuck,” Leonard says, with a roll of his heavy-lidded eyes. Kate protests that he’s read only half the sentence. “Yeah, I see that. I see the semi-colon,” Leonard says. “I understand . . . that more is coming, but I’m not sure I want to continue. O.K.? I’m not even making it through your first sentence.”

Ingratiation is not Rickman’s game; he doesn’t easily give himself away. His strategy while delivering these critical firestorms is to take his time, to hold still within the withering ennui, and to make the audience, like the students, wait on his words. His voice has an oboe’s moody edginess; words roll off his palate with a sibilant precision that is a perfect match for Leonard’s equal-opportunity destructiveness. “Christ, what a soul-sucking waste of words that was,” Leonard says. Kate is “a weenie, a whiner”; the idealistic Martin (the superb Hamish Linklater), who refuses at first to offer up his work for Leonard’s critical mugging, is a “pussy”; and Douglas (Jerry O’Connell), who already has an agent and a literary pedigree, is a “whore”—“and that’s in the writing. It’s perfect, in a kind of whorish way.”

Rebeck’s clever commercial entertainment contains just enough truth about writing workshops to keep an audience of non-writers interested. Of course, no professor, no matter how vainglorious or vitriolic, would ever come to class as unprepared as Leonard: his judgments are based on a cursory reading of a few pages handed over to him on the day, which he proceeds to digest and to toss unceremoniously on the floor. This is the preposterous Broadway version of a writing class. Although Douglas is teased for his literary name-dropping (“I won’t go to anyplace except Yaddo or MacDowell,” he says), Rebeck has a good line in it herself: Tobias Wolff, Salman Rushdie, and *The New Yorker* are sprinkled like truffle oil over the proceedings, to give the play a pungent whiff of authenticity. “Hopefully what I achieved is a little more, I don’t know, intellectually rigorous than what Kerouac was going for,” the smug Douglas says. “Yeah, I hope that, too,” Martin counters. “Because ‘On the Road’ was such a

Alan Rickman and the cast of Theresa Rebeck’s “Seminar.” Photograph by Max Vadukul.

minor achievement.” Leonard, or so he tells us, was at Yale with Robert Penn Warren: “He was ruthless and religious about sound. . . . If the sound wasn’t there, there was no discussion.” (As it happens, I was at Yale with Penn Warren, and this description of him is bushwa.) It says something about the robustness of Rebeck’s characterization and her humor that she makes you want this claptrap to be true. What she does get hilariously right is the complicated chemistry of these writing groups—the fragility of egos and the ferocity of envy.

The dream of being a writer and the crazy price one has to pay for excellence are impossible to demonstrate or, really, even to fathom. Instead, in this tidy version of literary endeavor, the characters all get some part of what they wish for. At the center of this happy ending is dyspeptic old Leonard, who, despite his best efforts, turns out to be a sort of Mr. Nice after all, a cross between Johnny Appleseed and the Lone Ranger, doing good wherever he goes—and offering himself up as the editor of a novel by one of his students. “That seminar was the prelude,” Leonard says. “You want to make me your servant, you got Mephistopheles in your pocket.” His bowwow swagger doesn’t ring true, but the impulse behind it does. Before sealing the deal, Leonard explains that having a decent editor is “the only way to learn anything about writing. . . . Help you see what it is, what you meant. What you didn’t even know you meant.” Amen.

In the realm of comedies of bad manners, Noël Coward’s 1930 play “Private Lives” set the high-water mark. Divorced from each other for five years, Amanda and Elyot, two dandies of British detachment, meet again on adjacent balconies of a Deauville hotel while honeymooning with their annoying new spouses; passion is rekindled, and, without so much as a farewell, they bolt for Paris. “We’re being so bad, so terribly bad,” Amanda says. Out of this gossamer premise, Coward fashioned a high-camp masterpiece in which normality is turned on its head and “bad” becomes “good.” “Private Lives” is a plotless play about purposeless people, who have inherited a world where romance is a put-on, honor a masquerade, morality a thing of the past, and the future unknown. Unmoored and unhappy, totems of the Depression-era mood of disillusion, Elyot and Amanda are flying blind, hiding their

disenchantment behind a smile. As Elyot says, “Let’s blow trumpets and squeakers, and enjoy the party as much as we can, like very small, quite idiotic schoolchildren.”

Coward’s lines hop and dip like knuckleballs: they’re not what they seem and they are hard to see coming. There’s a trick to delivering them. It’s timing plus posture: a highfalutin coolness imposed on fierce feeling. In the current revival (directed by Richard Eyre, at the Music Box), a sort of democratic North American earnestness seeps into the main characters, who can’t find the sense of superiority that should give Coward’s lines their fluting wallop. As Elyot, Paul Gross cuts a handsome figure; however, his tendency to grasp his head in anxiety whenever Elyot is under stress puts paid to the pretense of perfect equipoise and misses some of the fun, as well as the point. (“We have no prescribed etiquette to fall back upon. I shall continue to be flippant,” Elyot says.) There’s also little chemistry between Gross and Kim Cattrall, as Amanda. Although Amanda claims that she’s always been “sophisticated, far too knowing,” Cattrall doesn’t exude *louche savoir-faire*; she lacks the recklessness of the seriously frivolous. She performs proficiently enough, but, to my eye, she never inhabits the core of the character’s desperation. As a result, many of Coward’s signature lines amuse but don’t resonate.

In Paris, Elyot and Amanda are in their own bubble; the set designer, Rob Howell, makes the mistake of spelling out their state of mind. Instead of reinforcing the claustrophobia that builds both their passion and their hatred, he gives us a jokey set that is a sort of enormous, circular fish tank, with fish painted on the walls and a fishbowl onstage to over-egg the pudding. Most of the furniture, including the piano, is pushed to the perimeter. As they woo and fight, Elyot and Amanda career around the huge space, which keeps them at a distance from each other and diffuses the tension. When their abandoned mates, Sybil (Anna Madeley) and Victor (the droll Simon Paisley Day), arrive at the flat, only to discover Elyot and Amanda tearing at each other in a free-for-all, they’re much too far upstage to make the moment pay off. “Private Lives” is too well written not to entertain; Eyre’s production, however, gets Coward’s words but not his music. And, as the man said, “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.” ♦

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