

The Misanthrope

McCarter Theatre

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I didn't like the lighting that Michael Chybowski created from Andre Ernotte's production of Molière's *The Misanthrope*. I disagreed with some of the choices the director made, as well, so perhaps some of my lighting complaints stem from there.

I wrote a large note to myself on my program, summing up what I felt was most obviously wrong with the production. It read, "Too many distracting light changes in the middle of scenes." The lighting drew over-much attention to itself at inopportune times, when there was obviously much more interesting and significant things to pay attention to on stage. Part of this could be attributed to the director: Andre Ernotte apparently felt that long drawn-out dances between scenes would somehow further elucidate the plot (obviously, I felt the dances really added nothing to the production, and distracted from the plot and text). This desire snowballed into drastic light changes between otherwise continuous events, necessitated by switching to the (dark) "dance" lighting and back. This type of thing was not restrained to inter-scene tom-foolery, either. Long monologues would be interrupted by light changes when the lighting designer tried to comment on some deep meaning of the scene by shifting lights around. I have no problems with this, if done subtly, but these changes were large and distracting. Another example would be the lighting for the apron, which was brought up quickly whenever any actor ventured by chance near the front of the stage. It would have been *much* better to leave these lights on, or at least vary them more slowly or less drastically.

There was also some totally unmotivated lighting. I noticed at one point some very strong lekos spotted on nothing more substantially than a pair of

potted plants. If these plants had been at all incidental to the action, this might have been understandable, but the plants were strongly competing for the audience's attention, for no discernable purpose.

Nice effects included some very sharp set lighting (with the exception of the potted plants!). At one point in the 1st act, the set is strongly backlit for the first time, and we suddenly realize that all the mirrored panes on the doors are now perfectly transparent. Light streaming through the entrances onto the set also looked really nice; too bad it wasn't effectively used to further the plot or action or setting or anything "real." Instead, it was simply employed as a gimmick. The couple of entrances that could really have benefitted from such attention (Arsinoe's surprise visit, and the arrival of the guard) were bypassed in favor of lots of inconsequential "dance" entrances.

For the record, I noted in my program that I really liked the lighting at the end of the 1st act. There was cold light pouring through the doors, and a warm red color in the center of the room on the carpet. A bright spot illuminated Alceste. I then complained that the huge over-stage fresnels (intentionally visible to the audience) were not better used in cues light that. The potential of these huge over-head lights was never fully realized; as audience, we never had the sense that the lights were ever *participating* in a scene, although quantitatively they provided much of the general light for many cues. The audience's immediate idea of an intense beam of light trapping the actors from overhead, separating actions, dividing characters — or even for the "dances" — never materialized. Michael Cadden mentioned what most of us were thinking (even if we couldn't articulate it) when he mentioned that at first glance of the over-stage fresnels, he had immediately forecast a dramatic close to the piece with each of the six overhead units capturing a single isolated actor (perhaps Philinte and Eliante belonged in the same spot?). I felt that (if money were no object) a set of varilights would be fantastic in that overstage spot, where they could change focus to provide major illumination in the majority of the scenes, maintaining the meta-theatrical metaphor.

I liked the use of the foot lights to cast shadows on the massive walls of the sets during some of the pieces. I also noted the great care that had been taken with the many mirrors on stage; most especially the fact that there was no front light reflection on the ground in front of the mirrored doors. The actors were, as a rule, sufficiently lit: we could see them well, which is, after all, the foremost goal of the lighting designer. It's a pity that the lighting distracted as much as it did; but it fit in perfectly with the rest of

the production's insistence on highlighting meaningless invented detail while bypassing the tragic meat of *The Misanthrope*.