

Two Improbable Pairs, One Technicolor Gorgon

At first glance, the relationships are classically clear-cut in the two teasing one-act plays that make up "AdA," a trans-Atlantic melding of work by the playwrights Neil LaBute and Marco Calvani at La MaMa. You have, on the one hand, an imperious elderly woman and her long-suffering butler; on the other, a self-conscious middle-class square and the nymphet prostitute he had booked for an afternoon session.

But no relationship is exactly what it seems on the surface. Put any pair of human beings under a microscope, and strange mutations and strains come into discomfiting focus.

That's the premise behind both Mr. LaBute's "Lovely Head" and Mr. Calvani's "Things of This World," which opened on Thursday night and run through Oct. 14, with a cast that features Larry Pine and an astonishing Estelle Parsons in mismatched book-ends of roles. It isn't spoiling too much to say that after seeing these short works, you're unlikely to rush home and hug the one you love.

This double bill, in which the American Mr. LaBute stages the Italian Mr. Calvani's work, and vice versa (AdA stands for author directing author), was developed at the La MaMa international artist residence in Umbria last summer. Both playwrights are known for their pitch-black

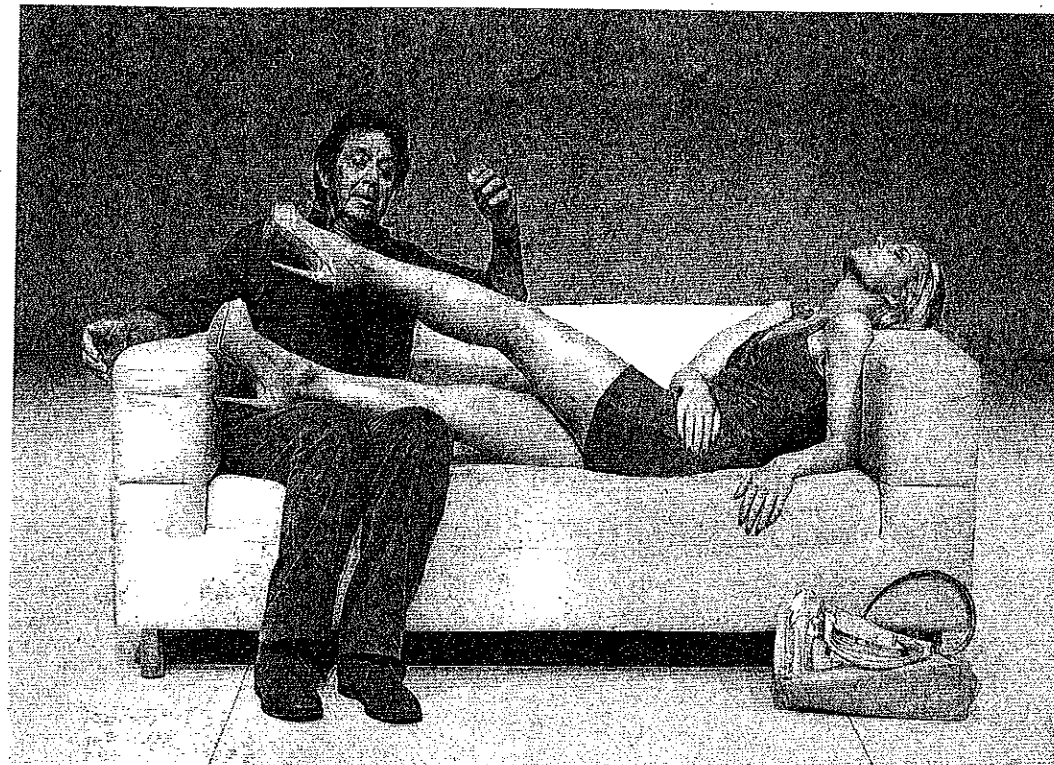
*Balances of power
are not what they
seem on the surface.*

views of human nature, and putting them in collaboration seemed to promise a Halloween-worthy orgy of creepy misanthropy.

The entertaining results of this union turn out to be more delicate and complex. Mr. LaBute, celebrated (and reviled) for his nasty moral parables with "gotcha!" endings, delivers one of his most illuminating character studies to date.

Mr. Calvani, known as a shocking young turk in Europe, has come up with a classic exercise in avant-garde theater that might have been written 50 years ago. Whatever your verdict on their relative merits, there's no denying the thrill of seeing actor's actors like Ms. Parsons ("Miss Margarida's Way," the movie "Bonnie and Clyde") and Mr. Pine (Louis Malle's "Vanya on 42nd Street") in close quarters and in full sail.

Ms. Parsons — who, if Wikipedia does not deceive me, is almost 85 — gives a performance of calibrated energy and flamboyance that would tax most actresses 20 years her junior. In "Things of This World" she portrays a character identified sim-



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Larry Pine and Gia Crovatin in "Lovely Head," at La MaMa's Ellen Stewart Theater.

ply as Woman, though it might as well be Gorgon.

Her hair spiked into glistening bristles, her jewelry flashing like neon signs, and her makeup rendered in Technicolor, Woman is a daunting creature before she even opens her mouth. Once she starts to speak, in a voice that seems alternately to come from the crypt and from beneath a dryer at Kenneth's hair salon, you may feel inclined to run for cover.

That's not an option for he who lives to serve her, the character

called Young Man, played by — surprise! — Craig Bierko, the Tony-nominated star of the Broadway revivals "The Music Man" and "Guys and Dolls." Young Man, whom we first see in a butler's uniform, is either Woman's dependent or supporter, or maybe both. Certainly, it seems that he is more than her butler. And, by the way, just who is that other man (Man, played by Mr. Pine), who sits reading in a chair, never saying a word?

The answers are both obvious and obscure, in the style of early

absurdist domestic portraits by Edward Albee, though Mr. Calvani has added his own level of economic allegory. (The play's epigraph in the program is from Karl Marx.) In English, at least, this all seems a tad vieux jeu.

But I had a good time watching Mr. Bierko hulk and cower. And, of course, looking at and listening to Ms. Parsons, who uses her voice as a lethal weapon and manages to turn Woman into something approaching a Tennessee Williams heroine.

Mr. Pine finally gets to speak

AdA (Author directing Author)

A pair of one-act plays: "Things of This World," by Marco Calvani, directed by Neil LaBute, stage manager, Alan Fox; and "Lovely Head," by Mr. LaBute, directed by Mr. Calvani, stage manager, Miriam Hyfler; sets by Neil Patel; costumes by Katherine Roth; lighting by David Moodey; translation by Bing Taylor. Presented by La MaMa. At the La MaMa Ellen Stewart Theater, 66 East Fourth Street, East Village, (212) 475-7710, lamama.org. Through Oct. 14. Running time: 1 hour 45 minutes.

"Things of This World" WITH: Craig Bierko (Young Man), Estelle Parsons (Woman) and Larry Pine (Man).

"Lovely Head" WITH: Gia Crovatin (Amber) and Mr. Pine (Gary).

in Mr. LaBute's "Lovely Head" and to demonstrate the power an actor can find in playing powerless. You would think that his character, Gary, would have the upper hand over the juicy young woman named Amber (Gia Crovatin, a newcomer and a knockout), since he is paying her to, uh, spend time with him. Yet he seems cravenly apologetic in his dealings with her, and his deference makes him slapstick clumsy.

As for Amber (perfectly embodied by Ms. Crovatin in a shaded performance), she behaves like a spoiled, sulky, intolerant brat.

So what gives? Is this some kind of bondage role-playing setup? The staggered revelation of exactly what dynamic propels these two recalls the sexual power games of David Ives's "Venus in Fur." But whereas Mr. Ives took us up into the realms of mythology, Mr. LaBute stays closer to home, providing some uncomfortable insights about. . . Well, I've said too much already.