

FRONT & CENTER

■ NEW HAVEN, CONN., NEW YORK CITY, AND PRINCETON, N.J.



Sweet Little Lies

Bill Camp and Jeanine Serralles in *The Misanthrope*, directed by Ivo van Hove at New York Theatre Workshop.

JOAN MARCUS

According to the recent eponymous French film, Molière bemoaned his reputation as a master clown and ached to write tragedies. That wish may have posthumously come true. New productions of *The Misanthrope* (staged by Belgian director Ivo van Hove at **New York Theatre Workshop** through Nov. 11) and *Tartuffe* (directed by Daniel Fish in a co-production between Princeton's **McCarter Theatre Center**, where it ran in October, and New Haven's **Yale Repertory Theatre**, where it begins Nov. 26) honor the serious side of the satiric playwright.

Known for delivering the classics as if they were hot off the press, van Hove spins his *The Misanthrope* as a tragedy of human morale. The biting translation by Tony Harrison, which revels in verse and vernacular, could have been written yesterday and has less hilarity than it does anthropological warfare. The characters' struggle between the *politesse* requisite in politicking and the burning appeal of the truth lends itself all too well to today's cutthroat urban jungle. Van Hove does not block his plays in advance ("The blocking comes out of the work," he says) and the result is a ballet of self-immolation. The throwaway yet consumptive vacuity of virtual existence is brought to life by overused cell phones and shiny

white Mac-tops that decorate a cage-meets-conference room set by Jan Versweyvel, van Hove's collaborator of 25 years. Nonstop live-feed video gives the cumulative impression that we're all under constant scrutiny, and points to the glaring disparity between the roles we play for others and who we really are.

If truth is to be valued, *Tartuffe* is one of literature's most notorious scoundrels. Fish calls the play, in a translation by Richard Wilbur, a "serious comedy" and urges his actors to commit to the realism of the story and characters. "If the action is played for all laughs, you risk sucking the muscle out of the humor," he says. For middle-aged paterfamilias Orgon, handing over household rule to Bible-beating *Tartuffe* is no joke, and may make his own diminishing powers easier to bear, but he is dangerously blind to the imposter's infamous chicanery. Fish interprets, "Human beings have a compulsion to sublimate themselves to others." Then, to political resonance, "Fear creates a market for *Tartuffes*."

Though getting a new look, these Molières may be uniquely *fidèle* to the actor-cum-playwright's tragicomic spirit. In these reprisals the comedian's grasp of human truth feels good even when it hurts. His powers of perception can't be denied: We are all betimes misanthropes, in a world that's *Tartuffified*. —Cassandra Csencsitz