

Liar's Club

Central Works' Misanthrope turns a comedy of manners into a web of deception.

By *Rachel Swan*

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Molière's 1666 play *Le Misanthrope ou l'Atrabilaire amoureux* had a moral subtext, in that it showed the artificiality of the 17th-century French elite. The play's moral compass is Alceste, a curmudgeon whose scorn for humanity gets quite irritating for the people who have to listen to him, but who nonetheless comes across as the play's most honest character. Alceste is a predecessor to the guy in *Li'l Abner* who walks around with a rain cloud over his head. He hates people and social niceties, and he's incapable of not speaking the truth. He's competing with three other men for the hand of gorgeous, glittery Célimène, who represents everything about society that Alceste despises. (She's an unabashed and genteel flirt.) It's a match that would obviously never work, and everyone can see that except for Alceste. Still, you want to root for the guy even when he gets raked over the coals for criticizing a love sonnet written by one of Célimène's other suitors. He's a misanthrope, and a bit of a douche bag, but he's the one character who grounds all of his actions in his principles. Transplanted to contemporary society, he'd probably be a journalist.



Misanthrope requires some patience from the audience, but it results in a bigger payoff.

Or so thought Gary Graves, who wrote Central Works' modern retelling of *Misanthrope* in 2002. In Graves' version Alceste is Alan (played by Darren Bridgett), a tousled city reporter who sits in his armchair chugging Pepto-Bismol as though it were an energy drink, and imprecating against humanity. Célimène is Celia (Deborah Fink), the fashionable widow of a rich businessman who, at age 35, suddenly finds herself unhitched and besotted by the single life. Her various suitors (save for Alan, of course) are agglomerated in the character of Phil (Michael Navarra), a rich party boy who seems incapable of even reading a love sonnet, much less writing one. Phil drives a V4 Roadster that Alan likens to "a big blue penis." He claims not to be a trust-fund baby but has all the tell-tale signs of one, from the flashy suits to the apparent lack of real employment. He and Alan propose to Celia on the same night, setting the stage for sure disaster.

Graves' script is a condensation of the original, in the sense that it occurs over a three-day period, and allows a lot of the exposition to take place outside the action of the play. A good move on his part, since it not only gives *Misanthrope* an air of moral ambiguity, it also makes the truth intentionally fuzzy. In this version, most of the important plot details — save for the two marriage proposals — happen offstage. So the characters constantly have to explain themselves to each other, and to the audience. Thus, their dialogue always seems like games of cross-examination and cover-up. Phil insists to Alan that he wasn't born into wealth but stumbled upon it. Celia blames an unhappy previous marriage for her current party-girl behavior — and for the fact that she's a prime

suspect in her ex-husband's murder. Alan tells the other characters that he got fired from the city paper for refusing to write puff pieces and defying his high-powered editor. The characters constantly dissemble, withholding information or revealing it in a canny way. Even Alan doesn't seem thoroughly convinced that the stuff he's saying is true.

Thus, part of the pleasure in *Misanthrope* is watching all those delicious moments when the characters get caught in a lie. Bridgett's Alan is the hardest to figure out. His contempt for other human beings seems heartfelt, but his desire to impress Celia — coupled with his recent expulsion from the newspaper — makes him seem not entirely trustworthy. Phil has the countenance of an utterly vapid character, but beneath the sunglasses and the big car he's clearly a lot more underhanded, judging from the way he tries to swipe Celia from a more respectable suitor (apparently, we later learn, because he wants to bilk her out of an inheritance). Celia, meanwhile, is the ultimate con artist and consummate victim of *Misanthrope*, and Fink plays her with alacrity. Dazzled by the bachelorette lifestyle, she prances around in a pair of silver stilettos, cosmo in hand, beguiling both her suitors and always trying to smooth things over. When confronted, she flinches. Fink is a world-class flincher.

The original *Misanthrope* was about honesty and the problem of overusing it. Grave's version, in contrast, is largely about deception, to the point that every scrap of dialogue sounds like prevarication. Still, it's a play that requires its audience to place a lot of trust on the three characters, who are burdened with telling their own back stories, and with describing what's going on in the other room. We also rely on them to reveal big things about themselves in small ways: Celia with her shrieks and her deer-in-the-headlights expressions, Phil by rolling his eyes and looking askance, and Alan by surreptitiously slipping the Pepto-Bismol bottle in his coat pocket, as though to hide his insecurities. Graves' *Misanthrope* tries to conceal and reveal things at the same time, so the moral — if there is one — remains opaque. It's tricky to pull off, and requires a little patience on the audience's behalf. But that makes for a greater payoff when the characters get exposed and their delusions start to unravel.