

Theater

Molière's *Archbishop Supreme Tartuffe* Shifted to Harlem, Brecht's *Chalk Circle* Updated to Now

By Alexis Soloski

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Lia Chang

What's more contemporary than a classic? It seems as if each new season brings us masterpieces propelled helplessly into the present, or at least the more recent past. Directors treat us to Oedipus as a suburban dad, Hamlet as an emo kid, Hedda surrounded by robots. Sometimes, these updates illuminate older plays, teasing out resonance and relevance; often, they serve as mere obfuscation. Last week saw the opening of two more renovated warhorses: The Classical Theatre of Harlem offered *Archbishop Supreme Tartuffe*, Molière's play reset in the Harlem Renaissance, and Performance Lab 115 debuted a modern-dress version of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*.



Reverend sexy motherfucker: De Shields

Details:

Archbishop Supreme Tartuffe

By Alfred Preisser and Randy Weiner
Clurman Theatre
410 West 42nd Street, 212 279-4200

Caucasian Chalk Circle

By Bertolt Brecht
The Chocolate Factory
5-49 49th Avenue, Queens, 212-352-3101

In the 1664 original, *Tartuffe* pretends religious devotion. He condemns the Seven Deadly Sins while indulging in most of them; his unmasking fuels the dramatic engine. But adaptors Alfred Preisser and Randy Weiner have dispensed with this hypocrisy: In their version, *Tartuffe* (André De Shields) is a man of the cloth—silk, satin, and velvet. Wholly unabstemious, he brags about his wealth and molests his scantily clad chorus. His own spin on the Ten Commandments advises the faithful to have fun, have sex, spend money, and "make sure to ride in a Cadillac."

Preisser and Weiner mean to skewer modern religious rascals, but they do so plotlessly. With *Tartuffe* an admitted reprobate, the musical lacks dramatic tension, becoming little more than a showcase for De Shields. And doesn't he know it. When he first strides onstage attired in a tight suit, hefty medallion, and roguish quiff, he offers a deliberate echo of Prince—holy father as sexy motherfucker. De Shields gives a charismatic performance, but also an indulgent one: Unsatisfied with the mediocre songs and speeches permitted him, he ad-libs. At the performance I attended, he swelled the running time by more than 20 minutes with exclamations, asides, and flirtation with female audience members that bordered on the actionable. This moves the show even further from Molière's original. Perhaps the creators should have dispensed with the earlier play altogether—they might have avoided their silly ending, in which, unable to charge *Tartuffe* with hypocrisy, they get him for tax evasion, then push De Shields back onstage for an encore.

By contrast, PL115 offers a more loyal and unpretentious version of its original—in this case, Brecht's 1945 *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, written during the writer's American exile. Though a dramaturgical note draws attention to the play's depiction of "economic opportunism and financial greed," this production, staged at the Chocolate Factory, seems uncertain of how it relates to the present and why it's costumed and set here. Alice Reagan's direction gestures toward the alienation affect, but also includes some Anne Bogart-ish choreography, a few nods to the Wooster Group, and even a bit of realism. This ought to make for a mess, but instead results in a quite likable, if occasionally clumsy, production, aided by its energetic cast. I'm not sure what Reagan means to say about Brecht's work, and I can't sense what drew her toward it, but she's offered a brisk, compassionate version of a difficult script. If the play warns of the "terrible temptation to do good," it seems as if PL115 has given in.

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