

MERRY MOLIÈRE
NOLA Project's 'Misanthrope' dazzles at NOMA
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By David Cuthbert
Theater writer

With just three shows under its belt, The NOLA Project has established itself as one of the most unique, versatile and accomplished theater groups in the city.

Composed of former New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts students who have gone on to New York University, their NYU cohorts, former and present teachers and local community theater actors, they burst upon the scene last summer with a compellingly comic production of Martin McDonagh's "The Cripple of Inishmaan" at NOCCA. They returned this year with the inspired, open-air "Get This Lake Off My House: Our Tempest," on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, which was playing to hundreds by the time it closed, just three weeks ago.

And now they have bounced back with something else entirely, Molière's timeless, satirical "The Misanthrope," using Richard Wilbur's wonderfully witty translation. Reset in present-day Paris, the barefoot beach kids now sport haute couture, plummy accents and an unerring way with high comedy. Under James Tripp's direction, they constitute a tight, true ensemble and each gives a skilled, nuanced performance. The result is an absolute, astonishing delight that is not to be missed.

And what a stroke of genius to do it in the New Orleans Museum of Art's Stern Auditorium: a piece of theatrical art surrounded by visual art, even though it means the 11 actors are crammed into minute spaces on either side of a stage not meant for theatrical performance.

Happily, that is not our worry. The audience has only to bask in the pleasure of the conversationally sparkling verse, the "tinsel nonsense" of polite society as it lolls about, spreading giddy gossip over flutes of champagne.

All of which incenses Alceste, who is honest and virtuous to a fault. He loathes the dishonesty, insincerity and shallowness of everyone around him, save that of Celimene, whose "notorious coquetry" he chooses to overlook due to the simple fact that he loves her. Alceste's decent, direct way of dealing with a world that does not value his purview gets him ever-deeper into trouble until he sees no way out but to flee into exile, Celimene and his best friend in hot pursuit.

Peter McElligott, who played the brooding fisherman Babbybobby in "Inishmaan," embodies certainty and righteousness as Alceste, who is painfully unaware that it is poisoning his regard for all humanity. Yet while Alceste's Boy Scout rectitude irritates, the actor never loses the character's innate charm and *comme il faut*.

Alexis Jacknow's frivolous yet fascinating Celimene says -- and worse, writes -- whatever

she thinks will cause the most mischief. She is a glittering, perfidious peacock who keeps changing feathers -- once, quite attractively, onstage.

Janet Shea's hypocritical Arsinoe is a faux reformer and an elegant deus ex machina, in chic black from head to toe, sharing a deliciously decorous scene of bitchy repartee with Jacknow.

Sean Glazebrook smoothly plays Alceste's sensible friend Philinte, who knows how to compromise and thus ends up with the most sensible woman onstage, Scarlett Bermingham, as the bespectacled, yet smoldering Eliante. A blondined Will Connolly and an oily Andrew Larimer are tops in fops, with A.J. Allegra as the poet with delusions of adequacy giving them a run for their francs. The cast is completed by James Bartelle in a richly comic bit as Alceste's servant Dubois, Nick Kocher as a guard anyone would let their guard down for and Michelle Bart as Basque, Celimene's fetching maid.

The chandeliered, minimal set is by Jenni-lee Crewe; Bermingham has assembled the color-coordinated costumes (Alceste in sensible brown, of course) and Gary Solomon Jr. lights up the stage pictures.

In 1971, when Brother Alexis Gonzales staged Molière's "The Miser" at Loyola University with the great actor Michael O'Sullivan, Times-Picayune chief critic Frank Gagnard wrote, "It is not only recommended, it is imperative that anyone who takes joy in theater sees this stylish and hilarious staging."

It is an honor for me to repeat his words now and apply them to this merrily magnificent "Misanthrope."