Brustein’s ‘Exposed’ gives ‘Tartuffe’ a present-day political twist

Back in 1961, when a teenage Donald Trump was a household name only in his own household, Philip Roth wrote that “the American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meager imagination.”

Moliere might have understood that creative challenge, especially if the French playwright had had a chance to survey the grotesque carnival that is American politics in the 21st century. Robert Brustein, now in his late 80s, took a very long look at that carnival, then put his own imagination to work in writing
“Exposed,” a present-day retelling of “Tartuffe,” Moliere’s classic 1664 comedy of religious hypocrisy, self-delusion, and the perils of letting a scoundrel go too far.

It’s a clever idea that yields mixed results in a coproduction by the Boston Center for American Performance and Boston Playwrights’ Theatre, directed by Steven Bogart at the Wimberly Theatre.

In place of Tartuffe, the pseudo-pious con artist, Brustein gives us Dick Cockburn (Michael Hammond), a lascivious televangelist running for Congress as a Republican in Texas. Cockburn is given to utterances like: “It is not global warming that is destroying our planet, it is genital heating — rampant lust and immorality.” About which the good preacher knows a thing or two.

In place of Orgon, the rich and devout man deceived and nearly dispossessed by Tartuffe, the playwright has created billionaire and would-be political kingmaker Seymour Sackeroff, clearly inspired by the Koch brothers, whom Sackeroff keeps calling “the Krotch brothers.” He is played by Jeremiah Kissel, who brings his usual verve and inventiveness to the role. Unfortunately, not every member of the ensemble matches Kissel’s nimbleness.

Brustein’s scorn for hypocritical religiosity is very nearly equal to Moliere’s. It’s hard to find fresh resonance these days, however, in the character of a televangelist. What’s left to expose, dramatically speaking, given the scandals that have erupted like clockwork in the tele-pulpit over the past quarter century? It’s also hard to satirize a political system that is almost literally beyond satire. Yet there’s something bracing in the sheer zest with which Brustein fights farce with farce, as it were, complete with Moliere-like excursions into verse.

In Moliere’s play, a wolf-sheep dynamic governs relations between Tartuffe and Orgon, but in “Exposed” there’s a kind of mutual opportunism in the way Cockburn and Sackeroff circle each other, at least at first. The billionaire’s luxurious home (the excellent set is by Mary Sader) abounds in hunting trophies, and in a campaign-finance landscape corrupted by the Supreme Court’s Citizens United ruling, Sackeroff clearly envisions Cockburn as another kind of trophy.

Might he be able to eventually get the preacher all the way to the White House? Sackeroff sees Cockburn as potentially useful not just in propounding right-wing dogma on taxes that will benefit one-percenters like himself, but in getting the Justice Department off his back. (Illicit activity at casinos he owns in Qatar have drawn the government’s attention).

Sackeroff’s expedient alliance with Cockburn sits well with the billionaire’s equally conservative mother, Hortense (Annette Miller), but it horrifies the rest of the Sackeroff family, who include his fourth wife, Candy (Abby Goldfarb); his gay son, Ronald (Scott Barrow), named after Ronald Reagan; and his daughter, Caroline (Annabelle Cousins). As in “Tartuffe,” dear old dad is intent on marrying off his daughter to the religious zealot. Near the end of “Exposed,” Remo Airaldi makes an uproarious appearance as a Very Special Guest who is perhaps the last figure the televangelist expects, or wants, to see.

As we approach Tuesday night’s Republican presidential primary debate on CNN, doubts may linger about whether Jeb Bush has sufficient fire in the belly, but no one will ever ask that question of Brustein. He could easily rest on his laurels — founder of Yale Repertory Theatre, founder of Cambridge’s American Repertory Theater, one of the most eminent drama critics of the past half century — but instead he keeps turning out new plays, including a trilogy on his beloved Shakespeare.

Moliere was no slouch, either, and “Exposed” reminds us of the enduring relevance of “Tartuffe.” Several of the GOP primary candidates have made ostentatious shows of piety. Maybe a CNN panelist should ask them the pointed question that one character poses to Tartuffe: “Why treat the will of heaven as your own?”
EXPOSED

Play by Robert Brustein

Directed by Steven Bogart


Don Aucoin can be reached at aucoin@globe.com.

https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/theater-dance/2015/12/15/brustein-exposed-gives-tartuffe-present-day-political-twist/IbTYT78ghSRWQBD0D4L5ZO/story.html