

## Reviews for **A.W.O.L.** November 2005

### **TimeOut NY**

Obeying the old adage "Nothing's funnier than a homeless butler," director Marion Schoevaert and company reinvent French writer Olivier Cadiot's "Le Colonel des Zouaves"—a tone poem about a delusional manservant—as a tale of the American street corner. At first it's just another tramp dreaming of being the boss, but Cadiot's text, a cousin to Will Eno's *Thom Pain*, is next-level, postmodern perfection.

Robinson (Rattazzi), a persecuted butler with a spy complex, hallucinates a career in the army, the brutal assassination of his master and a tryst with a red-haired vixen (dubbed Operation Freckles). Most of Robinson's expertise revolves around removing crumbs from a tablecloth, but he nevertheless dreams of inventing the neutron bomb. Meanwhile, a creepy phalanx of black-suited singers (are they just in Robinson's head?) utters lyrics such as "The class struggle is just lip service" in Adam Silverman's startlingly beautiful chorales.

In Schoevaert's version, Robinson barks orders to his troops from cardboard boxes, removing him another step from his fantasies of control. Cadiot finds absurdity in a jumped-up Jeeves, but for Rattazzi's character, even keeping a job would be a stretch. The performer exudes oodles of charisma, and even if every member of the chorus ignores him (and easily tops him by a head), he still seems to exert total command over his impassive troops. By turns adorable, pompous and in love with his shoe, Rattazzi may seem powerless and pathetic, but for this production's 75 minutes, he's in control.

— Helen Shaw

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### **Theatermania.com New York**

#### ***A.W.O.L.***

Reviewed By: Adam Klasfeld

For theater to stay vibrant, it often has to risk alienating complacent audiences, and that's the case with *A.W.O.L.* Playwright Olivier Cadiot's humorous, moving, but often arch portrait of homelessness

and alienation makes the audience work to uncover the author's insights.

Part of the six-month-long *Act French* festival, this Americanized version of Cadiot's play centers on a New York City beggar who fancifully re-creates the world around him. In his imaginary adventures, he fantasizes about a tryst (which he illustrates in explicit detail) with a freckled redhead who occasionally walks past him, navigates a food service crisis that takes on military proportions, and re-lives false memories of World War II heroism and tragedy. A group of 12 Wall Street businessmen surrounds him at all times, serving as a kind of Greek chorus for a post-modern age. This image is stark and poignant; the chorus is the mobile army of a functioning society from which the main character has become absent without leave.

As might be expected in a play of this sort, the line between illusion and reality blurs. We never know for certain whether the main character's stories are his memories, observations of the people who pass by him, or inventions pulled out of thin air. The play's setting is equally nebulous, as the Manhattan streets occasionally appear to be transported to the banks of the Seine. In one scene, a butler lectures a chef on how to present the accoutrements of duck *de la couronne*, and in another, the chorus repeats Hitler's remark that their country is a nation of small farmers that can run the fashion industry.

Cadiot's script consists of crisp, manic verse, the kind of poetry that is notoriously difficult to translate. Moreover, it is peppered with dated references that are even harder to convey. But translator Cole Swensen has done a terrific job of turning French slang into a modern American vernacular, and he often slips contemporary colloquialisms into the lyrical script.

Steven Rattazzi's breezy, clear, and restrained performance as the beggar greatly helps the audience to "get" the whirlwind action. The actor channels the archetypes of the little tramp, the hardened general, and the bitter butler with ease. He proves to be a consummate storyteller, never condescending to the audience by over-illustrating his actions but making them detailed enough to make sure that we can follow the plot.

Anna Kiraly's set design is simplicity itself: The floor is painted white and the walls are black. The playing area is empty save for a batch of flattened cardboard boxes and a clear garbage bag filled with soda cans, which the main character carries around with him. Director

Marion Schoevaert always uses the set creatively, and the production is further enhanced by Adam Silverman's wily music for the chorus, part opera and part Dada. You won't find many other theater pieces in New York that are as challenging as *A.W.O.L.* -- and that's a shame.

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## **nytheatre.com review**

Matt Freeman · November 10, 2005

A dozen or so suited men sing: "If God says Nothing / Then Do Nothing."

A lone man moves cardboard along the floor, as he is unable to touch it with his feet.

This man ties a shoe to his head, and carefully moves a trash bag full of empty Coke cans.

This man is a butler, an American hero, a homeless man.

He has a thing for Rabbit and is in love with a young woman whose face has too many freckles.

*A.W.O.L.*, an adaptation of Oliver Cadiot's *Colonel Zoo*, could very easily be called obtuse. It rambles like a lunatic. It throws in seemingly random and unrelated bits of text and imagery. It is whimsical and deadly serious. It embraces the sort of mess that few theatrical pieces do these days: it is a surrealist painting and a prose poem and it demands the attention of those who love language in theatre.

The play is covered from head to toe in resplendent words, which makes perfect sense considering its source. It is also centered and grounded by the masterful performance of Steven Rattazzi. Essentially a one-man show, Rattazzi is everyone he is supposed to be, switching from satire to sincerity, high status to low, within a few seconds, never feeling ethereal or unfocused. In moments he moves with the grace of a dancer, but never allows us to feel that we are watching an overly rehearsed performance. It's a marathon performance, full of life, and Rattazzi never misses a touching beat or laugh line. He is supported by an all-male chorus, who sing the wonderful music by composer Adam Silverman. Between Rattazzi and this chorus, there is a conflict between uniformity and passion that is palpable.

What is this play about? That's an open question. The book is about a butler, but director Marion Schoevaert and translator Cole Swensen have adapted this character into a schizophrenic everyman, moving throughout his identities fluidly. He is always, though, an outsider. Unable to touch or communicate with those around him, those with fixed and uniform identities. It becomes the journey of an explorer, who longs to be a part of his world, but has no place in it. Much like Beckett's novels, *A.W.O.L.* places a lone voice in the void, and shows how human the void can be.

The very thing, this unspeakable void, that makes *A.W.O.L.* powerful could also be, to some audience members, a frustrating flaw. The specifics are wantonly vague, and the script whirls around in both circumstance and tone, never placing itself in time. (The production notes that this takes place in the streets of downtown New York, but I had to take their word for it. I'm sure New York isn't the only place with cardboard boxes and Coca-Cola.) The lack of groundedness creates the plays dizzying highs, but makes for a difficult and dense evening, even at less than 90 minutes. I didn't walk out with a firm sense of what exactly was happening, other than the struggle. Each character had his obsessions, and together they formed the whole of our narrator; but in a mad world it's difficult to find a clean thread.

Somehow though, it all makes some sort of internal sense. Or doesn't. Either way, *A.W.O.L.* is as spare, and complex, as a poem.