

The Tale of the Allergist's Wife

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A Woman On the Verge Of Another Breakdown

By BEN BRANTLEY

THE TALE OF THE ALLERGIST'S WIFE

By Charles Busch; directed by Lynne Meadow; sets by Santo Loquasto; costumes by Ann Roth; lighting by Christopher Akerlind; sound by Bruce Ellman; production stage manager, Bradley McCormick; production manager, Michael R. Moody; associate artistic director, Michael Bush; general manager, Victoria Bailey. Presented by the Manhattan Theater Club, Ms. Meadow, artistic director; Barry Grove, executive producer. At City Center Stage 2, 131 West 55th Street, Manhattan.

WITH: Linda Lavin (Marjorie), Tony Roberts (Ira), Michele Lee (Lee), Anil Kumar (Mohammad) and Shirl Bernheim (Frieda).



Joan Marcus

Linda Lavin and Tony Roberts in "The Tale of the Allergist's Wife" by Charles Busch.

The hard-working demons who possessed little Linda Blair in "The Exorcist" have nothing on the forces raging within one Marjorie Taub, the title character of "The Tale of the Allergist's Wife," which opened last night at the Manhattan Theater Club.

In Charles Busch's window-rattling comedy of midlife malaise on the Upper West Side, Marjorie is played by Linda Lavin and this Tony-winning actress brings a high-flying fierceness to being down in the dumps.

Switch on a light when Marjorie is moping in the shadows, and she shrieks and recoils like a vampire dragged from the crypt. And if someone suggests that she may be a little, well, unhinged, she responds with a furious monologue that suggests a werewolf playing Greek tragedy. Feeling blue, as Ms. Lavin renders it, is a study in Technicolor.

Ms. Lavin's Marjorie is also, believe it or not, remarkably pleasant company, the center of a nimble sitcom of a play that pushes at the edges of its form without ripping through them. Mr.

Busch is best-known for his appealingly warped cinematic parodies in which he plays the nobly suffering or archly conniving leady lady ("The Lady in Question," "Vampire Lesbians of Sodom").

Here the female icon that Mr. Busch comes closest to impersonating is Wendy Wasserstein, the writer of such beloved epigram-slinging hits as "The Heidi Chronicles" and "The Sisters Rosensweig." You may also find yourself thinking of Neil Simon's mid-career comedies, plays that present harried New Yorkers speaking naturally in competitive one-liners.

Mr. Busch, it would seem, has swum straight into the mainstream. And with the graceful, unobtrusive assistance of the director Lynne Meadow and an assured cast that also features Tony Roberts and Michele Lee, he stays comfortably afloat there. "Tale" has moments cut from the synthetic cloth of television comedy, and it doesn't quite know how to resolve itself. But it earns its wall-to-wall laughs.

Marjorie Taub, wife of Ira the allergist (Mr. Roberts) and avid consumer of high culture, was first portrayed by Mr. Busch (under another name) in a segment of his one-person show "Flipping My Wig." Yet at no point in this production do you feel that Ms. Lavin is imitating a man imitating a woman. Real women, after all, can be just as self-dramatizing as drag queens; they just tend (for the most part) to look less like cartoons.

Indeed, if you've spent any time in Marjorie's usual haunts - Zabar's, say, or the 92nd Street Y, where many of her favorite cultural events are held - you've probably met someone very much like her: a wry but slightly fretful older woman in chic designer clothing (the costume designer Ann Roth knows just how she would dress), clutching a copy of *The New York Review of Books*.

She is an easy target for satire, with her infinite leisure time and intellectual aspirations, but on one involved in "Tale" is taking potshots. Marjorie may seem ludicrous with her references to Kafka, Rimbaud, Beauvoir and Hesse (her all-time favorite) and her description of her unpublished novel in which both Helen Keller and Plato are characters. But Marjorie is never ridiculous. Ms. Lavin endows her with too much real passion for that.

The play begins with Marjorie wallowing in the funk brought about by the death of her adored therapist and her recent public breakdown in a Disney store. Life in her tastefully appointed apartment (perfectly designed in coordinating shades of brown by Santo Loquasto) has never seemed emptier.

Her husband, Ira, with his clinic for the allergy-impaired homeless, seems most irritatingly fulfilled. Even Marjorie's aged, combative mother, Frieda (Shirl Bernheim), who lives down the hall, has her obsession with her digestive tract to keep her occupied. Marjorie, in contrast, sums up her condition with a banshee cry delivered in nasal French: "Perdu!"

Enter Marjorie's long lost childhood pal, Lee (Michele Lee), a free spirit with the resume that includes accompanying the Nixons to mainland China and a part as an extra in a Fassbinder movie. This glamorous name-dropper (her early days in Greenwich Village were spent with Kerouac and Baldwin) so completely fills the void in Marjorie's life that she immediately incites several varieties of suspicion.

How those suspicions are and are not confirmed gives "Tale" its tenuous plot. The play's first act turns into an often delightful tease, building to an uproarious curtain scene in which Marjorie hysterically questions her own sanity. The second act has Ira and Marjorie venturing into danger zones beyond their bourgeois existence: both the play and the Taubs then retreat awkwardly and abruptly, and the evening ends on an unsatisfyingly flustered note.

Yet even if you leave "Tale" feeling hungry, you're likely to experience similar pangs while watching it. Granted, the script has moments that are pure sitcom shtick, as when Marjorie defiantly tells off her mother's doctor on the telephone in an applause-milking scene that recalls every other episode of "Designing Women."

But for the most part Mr. Busch demonstrates a sure gift for turning gimlet-eyed social observation into hearty comedy with just one little push into exaggeration. And under Ms. Meadow's direction, the actors provide a balancing quality of restraint that both enhances comic impact and disguises clichés.

Mr. Roberts, the straight man of Woody Allen films for so many years, is an expert in resonant underplaying and an essential part of the production's chemistry of credibility. Ms. Bernheim brings a winning directness (as opposed to the usual preciousness) to her passive-aggressive geriatric.

Anil Kumar is charmingly effortless-seeming in his small but crucial role as a doorman. And Ms. Lee, who improbably remains just as much a knockout as she was in her heyday as a sex symbol in the 1960's, conveys surface cheer and tantalizing ambiguity with minimal effort.

No one could call Ms. Lavin's tireless performance low-key, and yet it never seems false. she has the physical nuances of a certain type of upper-middle-class Manhattanite down cold, from the way she sucks in her cheeks in moments of impatience to the fussy social reflexes of the veteran hostess.

At the same time, there is a fine madness in Marjorie, a heroic sense of despair and exasperation. Of course a woman who judges everything by standards set by Tolstoy and Flaubert is going to find herself wanting. But even as she signs, "Everything today seems so trifling," Ms. Lavin's battling dilettante cannot be dismissed as trivial.