

STAGE AND PAGE

Keith Garebian

RITTER, DENE, VOSS

by Thomas Bernhard

Directed by Adam Seelig

A One Little Goat Theatre Company Production

at the Alchemy Theatre

November 17-December 3, 2006

Adam Seelig is an extremely intelligent, brave young director who has boldly presented Toronto with the English-language world premiere of Austrian Thomas Bernhard's challenging play, *Ritter, Dene, Voss*, a psychosexual comedy that is sometimes bright on the surface, often hysterical, and always edgy. The title is really nothing more than the names of the original players in Bernhard's comedy, but the actual story of the piece concerns two sisters, both actresses, who compete subtly (with undertones of incest) over their emotionally disturbed brother (loosely based on Ludwig Wittgenstein) who is returning home after treatment in an institution. Bernhard was generally considered a "shit-disturber" and his plays are often filled with rants, free of punctuation marks and taking the form of monologues. In this one, the rants are really the brother's, though each sister has monologues as well. *Ritter, Dene, Voss* is a much longer play in its original version, running to at least two and a half hours. Seelig has cut it down to a more manageable 110 minutes, though it is impossible to tell what has been lost or gained as a result.

Much of the seventy-five minute first act is played fast and seemingly on the surface, with the two actresses (Maev Beaty as Dene and Shannon Perreault as the younger Ritter) racing in their deliveries but without much apparent psychological underpinning. This, as it turns out, is deliberate, for Seelig wishes his audience to be jarred by sudden comic and dramatic tropes that come forcefully and sometimes with post-modernist cleverness. He also wishes to mask the dark, disturbing elements with a form of irony, and he pushes his small-scale production in a virtually allegorical representation of what Bernhard himself calls in the text "histrionic perversity." Hence the headlong tempo (especially by Ms. Beaty), the exaggerated grimaces, the surface comedy of manners, direct addresses to the audience, the dinner-table scene that degenerates unexpectedly into violence, the grotesque rants of the brother, whom Greg Thomas plays like a clone of Don Rickles conjoined to Jack Nicholson in a most extravagantly mannered mode. Yet, the style, that bothered me in the first half, begins to make sense and have real effect in the second, when the psychological and didactic layers of the story are exposed to telling effect. As the sisters, Ms. Beaty has a resonant voice and acts with a veritable gleam in her eyes, while Ms. Perreault (looking very much like a young Isabelle Rossellini) is like a seductive cat that has swallowed a canary, though this cat spits acid from time to time. Greg Thomas is a whirlwind, though I would have preferred less whirling wind and more revelatory calm at the centre of the storm.

It has surely been a long time since Toronto has seen a play that demands of a viewer unbroken attention, an alert mind, and an open disposition. Bernhard is not for those who like their comedy plain and simple; nor is he for those who are unprepared to interrogate the surfaces of things. Seelig's production is a welcome assault on the normal complacency of Toronto's alternative theatre scene.