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On the Surface, the Moral. Beneath That, the Blood.

By BEN BRANTLEY

They are not cute or cuddly, these furred and feathered creatures who have arrived from France, demanding your acquaintance. And despite the presence among them of a lap dog with a Louis XIV coiffeur and a cicada dressed like a bootleg flapper, you wouldn't call any of them precious either, which was probably what you were expecting.

Instead the members of the menagerie overseen with such deep-burrowing insight by Robert Wilson in the Comédie-Française's revelatory "Fables de La Fontaine," part of the Lincoln Center Festival 2007, are most memorable for their capacities for inflicting and suffering great pain. And whether predator or victim, none is morally unblemished. They're just trying to get by, get through and, in some cases, get to the top, just like the people sitting around you in the audience.

The unlikely coming together of Mr. Wilson, a Texas-born avant-gardist deluxe, and the Comédie-Française, the three-and-a-half-centuries-old classical theater company of Paris, has produced one of those rare, mutually beneficial marriages of opposites that take both partners in brave new directions while allowing them to retain their own identities.

First staged at the Comédie in Paris three years ago to great réclame, this production sheds any distracting cultural baggage as soon as Michael Galasso's faux-Baroque music begins. This happily is not one of those instances when Americans leave the theater muttering about the smirky feyness of French taste.

For what Mr. Wilson and his ensemble have done is uncover the rush of pulsing blood beneath the lapidary drollness of La Fontaine's moral tales written in the 17th century, a style that the poet Seamus Heaney has identified as a crafty balance of "folk wisdom" and "poker-faced formality."

With a palette of light and sound that finds a primal scream within the stately rhythms of a minuet, Mr. Wilson and company wrench La Fontaine out of his frozen niche in the académie and thrust him back into the real, teeming world he observed with such passion and dispassion.

These are not La Fontaine's "Fables" as you studied them in introductory French literature,

fluidly assembled verses with tidy morals and sharp bite; these are the fables as life itself, and you may never have another chance to see just how scary they are.

Before I go on, I should point out that those who saw this production when it opened on Tuesday were able to experience first-hand the Fontainian precept that great pleasures seldom come without price tags. Mr. Wilson, having a *crise de lumière* (problems with lighting cues), delayed the curtain for more than an hour while some of Manhattan's richest and chicest sweltered in an airless throng.

Once the show started, it became clear that Mr. Wilson's fears were not merely symptoms of artistic hyper-sensitivity. The show's rhythms, and yes, its lighting, felt uneasily off-kilter now and then, diluting the force of black-out images and briskly hurled epigrams. And the use of supertitles was, to put it mildly, capricious and often confusing. (Make a point of reading the full translations in your program before the show begins.)

Nonetheless the brilliance of what Mr. Wilson and company were achieving here was implicit even before the lights came up onstage. The sounds of nature — not the pastoral-idyll variety but the kind that promises redness of tooth and claw — filled the air in counterpoint to the Baroque-style musical repetitions of Mr. Galasso's astute score. Even the mathematical progressions of a harpsichord seemed underlined by a mortal throb.

And when La Fontaine himself, played by the actress Christine Fersen, shows up in period courtier's garb to make his salutations to the audience, we know we are in highly sophisticated hands.

Surveying the house, he doffs his hat with gallantry mixed with uneasiness, courtesy tempered by a whiff of self-contempt. He wrinkles his nose, as if something in the theater smells bad. And perhaps it is worth noting here that La Fontaine was reliant on the kindness of rich patrons, which makes him at least a bit like Mr. Wilson.

As La Fontaine summons his literary menagerie into being, the superb Ms. Fersen (who this year became the dean of the Comédie-Française) sustains and transmutes this air of ambivalence. He is sometimes charmed, sometimes revolted by the creatures who join him onstage in an introductory courtly dance, itself an inspired mix of the feral and the formal.

When he looks upon the towering lion (the magnificent Bakary Sangaré), he turns away with an open mouth that equally suggests pity and fear. Both responses, it will emerge, are correct.

The Fontaine who guides us, then, is no detached pundit, ruminating from the clouds. This is his world too, so it becomes ours. And while the scenes that follow bear the unmistakable visual imprint of Mr. Wilson — the menacing geometric shadows, the self-deconstructing

movements, the glamorously menacing figures of eccentrically varied body types — this director's signature style has never felt so unnervingly immediate.

In relating familiar tales like “The Crow and the Fox,” “The Lion and the Gnat” and “The Oak and the Reed,” Mr. Wilson isn't going for obvious satire. Instead he insists that we sense the ravening fear, hunger and sadness that imbues each tale of power, duplicity and survival.

It's quite an act of prestidigitation, this balancing of Baroque elegance and primal ferocity. But it infuses every level. The costumes, as might be expected, are a marvel of stylish suggestion and wit, from that of the skyscraping silver-horned stag to the sanctimonious ant, who wears a mask rather like a steel welder's and a dress like Queen Victoria in mourning.

But the same double-edged eloquence is evident in the movements of all the performers, who bring their own specific steps to the bestial gavotte. Their physical presence is matched by the sounds they make: the unforgettable cry of a lion, about to be torn to death by dogs; the frightened bleating of a lamb in conversation with a wolf; the pomposity-deflating punctuation of a frog's hiccup.

Mr. Wilson has often insisted on the primacy of image and sound over word. Here, more successfully than in other instances I can think of, he lets words lead and yet still be transformed by the sights and sounds around them. In doing so, he demonstrates that there is richness, fluidity and flexibility in a text that has been carved in marble.

By the way, the official word is that this “Fables” is great for children. But it offers absolutely none of the consoling hope of this summer's other great exercise in Gallic anthropomorphism, the sublime animated feature “Ratatouille.”

The talking animals of Mr. Wilson's world are not sharing, caring types. They're solipsists, flatterers, betrayers in a scary every-quadruped-for-himself world. Come to think of it, kids who have grown up in New York in recent years should feel right at home.

FABLES DE LA FONTAINE

Directed by *Robert Wilson*; in French, with English supertitles; sets and lighting by Mr. Wilson; original music by Michael Galasso; costumes by Moidele Bickel; dramaturgy by Ellen Hammer. Presented by the Comédie-Française, as part of the *Lincoln Center Festival 2007*, Nigel Reddin, director. At the Gerald W. Lynch Theater at John Jay College, 899 10th Avenue, at 58th Street, Clinton; (212) 721-6500. Through Sunday. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes.

WITH: Christine Fersen (Jean de La Fontaine), Gérard Giroudon (Donkey/Small Cock/Cock), Cécile Brune (Mouse/Goat), Christian Blanc (Wolf), Coraly Zahonero (Cicada/Lamb), Françoise Gillard (Hare/Young Mouse/Little Dog), Céline Samie (Crow/Tree/Circe), Laurent Stocker (Frog/Tiger/Man), Laurent Natrella (Fox/Man), Nicolas Lormeau (Monkey/Ox/Spider), Madeleine Marion (Ant/Heifer/Cow/Lady), Bakary Sangaré (Lion), Léonie Simaga (Shepherd/Cat/Grass Snake/Sheep), Grégory Gadebois (Bear/Frog) and Charles Chemin (Stag).

Note: Injury Interrupts 'Fables'

Injury caused cancellation of Thursday night's sold-out performance of "Fables de La Fontaine" at the Lincoln Center Festival. A matinee at 2 p.m. on Sunday has been added to accommodate exchanges for Thursday night's ticket holders. The injury was suffered by Madeleine Marion, whose roles include the Ant, Heifer, Cow and Lady in the Comédie-Française presentation at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater at John Jay College. She will be replaced by Muriel Mayette, president and artistic director of the Comédie-Française. Information on ticket exchanges or refunds: (212) 875-5456.

Lincoln Center Festival 2007 continues through July 29. Information: (212) 875-5456, linconcenter.org.

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