

Martin Grrrrrr

By Bob Mondello

Martin Guerre

By Alain Boublil, Claude-Michel Schönberg, and Stephen Clark
Directed by Conall Morrison
At the Kennedy Center Opera House
to Jan. 16

Lion in the Streets

By Judith Thompson
Directed by Michole Biancosino
At the District of Columbia Arts Center
to Feb. 5

The trouble with washing garbage is that you can get it really clean—sparkling, even—but it's still garbage.

The folks responsible for *Martin Guerre*, the much revamped new pre-Broadway musical at the Kennedy Center Opera House—so revamped that the revamping itself has become part of the show's sell—have reportedly cleaned up the plot, streamlined the staging, neat-

ened and exiled by the town when he won't bed his wife, Bertrande, his abandoned but loyal spouse; and Arnaud, who befriends Martin on the battlefield and then, like some proto-Mr. Ripley, appropriates his friend's identity upon returning to civilian life. Bertrande ends up liking her user-friendly new husband better than she liked the one who went off to war—which adds a little spice to the mix.

Both *The Return of Martin Guerre*, the 1983 French film version of this French legend, and *Sommersby*, the 1993 Hollywood remake that set the tale in the American South during the Civil War, kept the other principals and the audience in the dark as to whether the man who returned from the war was an impostor. The musical doesn't. Rather, it makes much of the notion that the real impostor in the story is the Catholic village that piously runs Martin out of town and then embraces his replacement. Villages, alas, don't make very distinct characters, and that's espe-

century farmers sound as if they're gabbing at a Noël Coward garden party. Still, surely someone, somewhere on stage could be given a deft turn of phrase amid all the poetic platitudinizing.

For what it's worth, the performers give their all. Understudies Jodie Langel and Pierce Peter Brandt acquitted themselves quite nicely at the performance I saw as Bertrande and Arnaud, though they couldn't make much sense of the emotional waffling the characters must do all evening. If Hugh Panaro came across as a stick with a great voice in the title role, that's largely because the authors made Martin's motivations impenetrable. The only performers to register strongly enough with the audience to bump up the applause at the curtain call were Michael Arnold as the village idiot (his love for a scarecrow is a good deal more affecting than the central story) and Jose Llana as Guillaume, a secondary character who loves the leading lady unrequitedly and (for reasons best known to the authors) consequently ends up murdering Protestants.

The show looks like a million bucks, but, given that producer Mackintosh

Project Y, a new D.C.-based troupe that aims to serve 20-something theatergoers who just don't care what Arthur Miller has to say about salesmen, dead or alive. As staged by Michole Biancosino, one of the company's co-founders, *Lion* comes out shouting and rarely lets up.

The evening's story, such as it is, centers on Isobel (Deanna Harris), the center of an immigrant girl who was murdered some 17 years ago. Isobel doesn't know she's a ghost initially, but the light dawns as she realizes that most of the people around her don't see her. Children do, possibly because they're so anxious to find someone weaker than themselves to pick on. So does a victim-in-training (Lindsay Allen), whose husband is about to humiliate her by bringing his girlfriend to a neighborhood party.

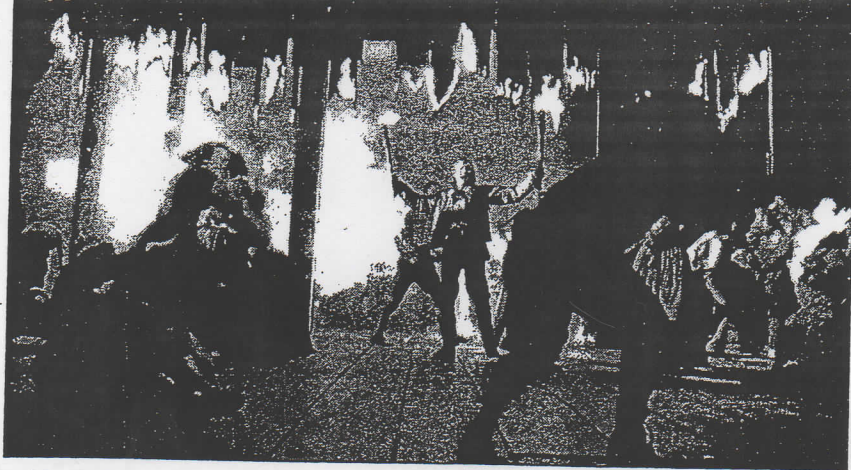
When Isobel begins exploring the urban landscape of which she's no longer a physical part, she witnesses mostly the brutalizing of weak characters by bullies. The author's general drift appears to be that such behavior is less than commendable—which may not be much to chew on thematically, but it's enough to give a through-line to the show's vignettes. So, as Isobel watches from the sidelines, a homophobic taunts the gay geek who once aroused him in grade school, a wealthy woman who fancies herself a nutritionist publicly upbraids a teacher for giving kids jelly doughnuts as rewards, a journalist knocks a woman suffering from cerebral palsy out of her wheelchair for talking too brazenly about sex, and an insecure groom-to-be harasses his fiancée about her rape six years earlier.

These are not pleasant people for the most part, but they're embodied vividly by Project Y's cast—again, neither subtly nor deeply, but with a collectively distinctive voice. Harris' ghostly immigrant is appropriately haunting, with plaintive eyes and a voice that accuses. Allen is abrasively effective, both as a humiliated homemaker who refuses to go quietly and as a cancer patient who wants to go as picturesquely as *Hamlet's* Ophelia. Sarah Bragin lends aggressive sexuality to several proletarian characters, while Christina Anderson registers a chilly reserve as their patrician counterparts. Tyson Lien blusters and cowers by turns and is quite funny when delivering a comic rant about carving a 29-pound chicken. And Jon Cohn has a volcanic manner that serves him well whether he's playing a young gay Catholic trying to get his father confessor to confess or bringing menace to homophobic thuggery.

Biancosino's staging sends these actors ricocheting around the District of Columbia Arts Center's tiny auditorium with what can best be termed tightly focused abandon. Gestures that seem random generally turn out not to be, and ragged stage pictures always seem to coalesce artfully by the time the lights fade. Though it's possible to fault the director for encouraging consistent high volume when softer playing might shed more light on character, the passion and energy she elicits from her attractive performers is undeniable.

The troupe's designers also handle their assignments well on what was obviously a minuscule budget, contributing minimal lighting and sound effects, and a setting that amounts to twisted bolts of white fabric and a pair of swings. The production is small and sharp, with nothing extraneous anywhere—a strong debut on every front. **GP**

Martin's having conjugal troubles.



ened character details, and spent months in London, Minneapolis, and Detroit polishing the music and lyrics. And because Alain Boublil, Claude-Michel Schönberg, and Cameron Mackintosh are all consummate pros—the same guys who wrote and produced *Les Misérables* and *Miss Saigon*—the show is now about as assertive, forthright, and passionately sung as anyone could wish.

Still, it's junk—easily the least involving tuner to hit town since *Whistle Down the Wind* (and *Titanic* fits in there somewhere, so that's saying something). The problem is chiefly that the authors made their central characters compelling, so concerned were they with fitting them into a religious 16th-century socio-economic diorama. As in both of the team's earlier smashes, the figures mounting the barricades are mostly there so the audience will have someone to root for. It's the political background that inspired Boublil and Schönberg—which is why so many of their best tunes are anthemic.

Here, the background is a schism between greedy Catholics and secretive Protestants in the French town of Artigat circa 1564. The hapless ciphers in the foreground are Martin, who marries young

cially true of Artigat, which seems populated entirely by slender, handsome young adults with nearly identical big voices.

Because the three leads share all those qualities (on the night after the premiere, I saw two understudies, but their program photos were interchangeable with those of the folks they replaced), a wearying sameness quickly infects the proceedings. When every tune is belted to the rafters (the title character manages this with his jaw clenched most of the time), they start to blend together after a while, no matter how pretty they are. It's not fair on first hearing to dismiss the songs as much of a muchness, but although there are 33 individual titles listed in the program, I would almost swear they're all being sung to the same four melodies.

Part of the problem is Boublil's tendency to craft clear but determinedly bland lyrics of the sort that don't draw distinctions between characters. Put any of Martin's lines in Bertrande's mouth and they'd sound equally apt—something that wouldn't work at all in, say, *Gypsies and Dolls* across town. Granted, Boublil must fit rhetoric about religion, superstition, and betrayal into his rhyme schemes, without having his 16th-

probably spent \$6 million, that's not quite the accomplishment it sounds. Director Conall Morrison and designer John Napier have come up with one-and-a-half nifty effects. The opening image—a cannon firing a perfect smoke ring over the heads of the audience—sets the stage nicely; a second-act wall of flame is a bust, considerably less effective than, say, the torchlight parade in *Evita*. In most other respects—and especially in its television commercials—the show appears intent on coming across as a darker, skimpier, more agrarian incarnation of *Les Miz*. Obvious impostor, I'd say...and I'd guess the villagers in Manhattan will concur.

Out with the old, in with the new. A shot of theatrical adrenalin to ring in the new year, *Lion in the Streets* is pretty much the antithesis of the calculatedly picturesque nonsense at the KenCen. Rough, angry, funny, crude, and bursting with youthful energy, this ghost story by Canadian playwright Judith Thompson wants nothing more than to energize audiences.

The play is neither subtle nor deep, but it has a distinctive voice, which is apparently what brought it to the attention of