Notes From Underground

(Yale Repertory Theater; 480 seats; $65 top) NEW HAVEN, Conn. A Yale Repertory Theater presentation of a play in one act adapted by Bill Camp and Robert Woodruff, based on the novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky, from a translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. Directed by Woodruff.

Man - Bill Camp

Liza, Musician - Merritt Janson

Apollon, Musician - Michael Attias

By FRANK RIZZO

"Notes From Underground," world premiering at Yale Rep, is an open wound of a play, oozing self-loathing, throbbing with intensity and stinking with misogyny. Only despair, guilt and hate act as balm for its wretched and abusive antihero. The feel-good play of the season this ain't, but one doesn't pick up Dostoevsky for a beach read. He means to take you to the basement beneath the lower depths of a man's buried soul. Going from page to stage, this largely internal monologue is not always illuminating, engaging or satisfying, but Robert Woodruff's helming is brilliantly cold, and Bill Camp's work is as raw and real as any stage performance in memory.

The drama is true to the dark, strange yet deeply rooted worlds Woodruff created for the stage prior to his ankling two years ago at American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass. "Notes From Underground" easily fits into that twisted body of work.

But despite this bravura self-exorcism, the show still flags, with repetitive themes and uneven pacing during its intermission-less two hours. Several audience members fled for the exits, even before Camp started to degrade the naked prostitute. Clearly, this is not everyone's cup of bile.

Taken from Dostoevsky's exploration of the descent into madness of a poor uncivil servant, it's one very long rant from a man undone by the world around him and now turning against himself. Call it crime and self-
punishment, with a protagonist as hard on himself as he is on others, especially Lisa (Merritt Janson).

The Man (Camp) is holed up in his subterranean lair, a dingy crumbling office space, with snow falling through its missing ceiling tiles and barely a spot of color in David Zinn's set. Mark Barton's lighting, too, washes out any hope in this creepy limbo, not through shadows of doom but their opposite: sterile and unnerving illumination.

Also feeding the weird and loopy atmosphere is a pair of musicians on opposite sides of the set (one of whom becomes a leading character and the object of the Man's fury). They provide welcome musical accompaniment with a fitting jazz turn or techno riff.

But the show rests on Camp (who adapted the book for the stage with Woodruff). He gives a perf of such primal power that one is riveted by the sheer act of his character's psychotic defiance and emotional meltdown. He gives endless variety to many of the monologues, and even finds little pockets of humor amid the desperation. But in the end we are more weary than moved.

"I am sick," confesses the Man into a recording device that flashes his paranoid face onscreen. "I am a wicked man." (Projections designed by Peter Nigrini give an intimate look at the character's unraveling mind.) The Man has withdrawn from love, work and life and bunkered himself from a corrupt world, feeding on his fury, surviving by will, propelled by madness. He says he is an insect, a worm, a maggot -- and who can disagree? That is, until in a flash of light and a plunge of darkness, he vanishes. Yet he stays behind in the mind. Forever bleeding internally.

Sets, David Zinn; costumes, Moria Sine Clinton; lighting, Mark Barton; original music and sound, Michael Attias; projections, Peter Nigrini; production stage manager, Kris Longley-Postema. Opened, reviewed March 26, 2009. Runs through April 11. Running time: 2 HOURS.

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