

Theater

'La Bete dans la Jungle': The Beast Loses Bite

By NELSON PRESSLEY
Special to The Washington Post

In Henry James's story "The Beast in the Jungle," a young man encounters a woman he met once before, a woman who turns out to be the only person in the world with whom he has shared this secret: He can't say how, but he is certain that he is doomed. The tale, a psychologically complex expansion of the Narcissus and Echo myth, is wonderfully strange, and so is most of Theatre de Lorient's measured, deeply atmospheric "La Bete dans la Jungle," which wraps up its two-performance run at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater tonight.

Balcony seats are probably ideal. The wider perspective allows you to take in director-designer Eric Vigner's strikingly deep tableaux as well as the English translation projected above the stage. (The performance, part of the center's Festival of France, is in

French.) Vigner has a lot of visual tricks up his sleeve; much of the action is viewed through a bamboo curtain patterned with a landscape by 18th-century painter Jean Honore Fragonard, and an army of stately oil portraits gets elaborately shifted and even upended as the menace grows. Even Vigner's frame is fascinating: The dark action unfolds under a vaporously lighted white arch, as if a clear black tunnel had been drilled through fog.

All this draws you into the mystery of John Marcher, the man who does nothing but await his grim fate. It thrills him to think he has been marked out so specially; this is the Narcissus angle, and Jean-Damien Barbin plays it splendidly. He stands as if waiting to be painted, and he describes Marcher's dread in tones of rapture, lifting heavenward his arms and the slim cane that he waves like a baton. (That cane is one of Marcher's

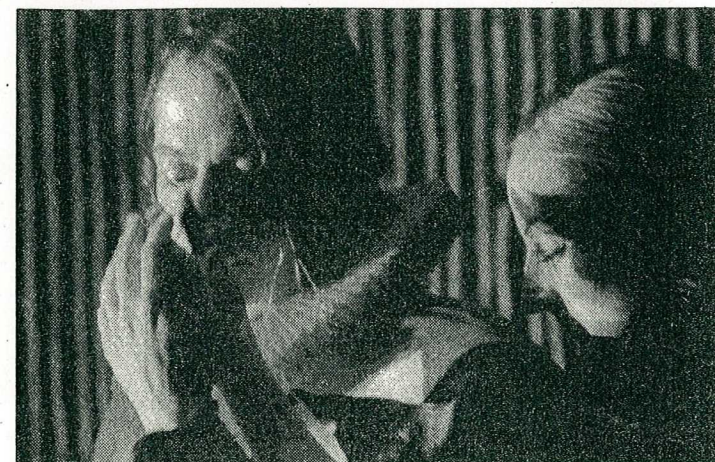
affectations, but it's also a tool of the blind.) Imagine Hamlet strutting jauntily to his disaster and you'll have an idea of Barbin's effect.

The Echo to this Narcissus, the woman who loves Marcher without reward, is Catherine Bertram, played with otherworldly calm by Jutta Johanna Weiss (whose magnificent voice is as luxurious and nearly as deep as Barbin's). Catherine agrees to keep Marcher company for years on end as he waits for the "beast in the jungle." Her loyalty raises questions: Would it be fair for him to marry her, knowing that something awful is coming? And does she know something he doesn't know?

It's all terribly moody, moving with the studied pace of "Last Year at Marienbad" and inspiring the same polarized reaction (much of Thursday's audience sat rapt, while some snored or left). Christophe Delarue's spare lighting catches the actors from the side, if

at all, and Xavier Jacquot's sound design ranges from Mozart to McCartney to cafe music without hitting a false note.

And then it all crashes to the ground. Repeated monkeyshines during a birthday celebration turn into five dead minutes, and the rest of the show is ponderous, from the reverse striptease (the nude Catherine, partially obscured, putting on white gloves) to the explicit theatricality of Weiss arranging stuffed ravens on the stage as she murmurs into a microphone. The focus becomes role-playing, which feels more like Marguerite Duras, who adapted James Lord's English dramatization, than Henry James. The notion—the construction, even—of identity is implicit in the tale, of course, and it's riveting to see these co-dependent characters physically tethered to one another when Catherine slowly unties Marcher's shirt and holds the laces as a puppe-



BY ALAIN FONTERAY—KENNEDY CENTER

Jean-Damien Barbin as John Marcher and Jutta Johanna Weiss as Catherine Bertram in the intriguingly staged "La Bete dans la Jungle."

teer holds strings.

But the dress-up games and belabored rituals of the latter stages grow mannered to a fault; psychological tension is upstaged by abstruse theatrical gestures, robbing "La Bete" of its bite. James's story ends with an unexpected blaze as the shape of Marcher's dreaded beast becomes apparent. This version barely flickers before go-

ing out.

"La Bete dans la Jungle," French version adapted by Marguerite Duras from James Lord's play in English, based on Henry James's novella. Directed by Eric Vigner. Running time, 1 hour 45 minutes. At 8 tonight at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater. Call 202-467-4600 or visit www.kennedy-center.org.