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Review

Some Historic/Some Hysterical

Clemente Soto Vélez Cultural Center. By Ildiko Lujza Nemeth and Jessica Sofia Mitrani. Dir. Nemeth. With ensemble cast.

Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot was a French neurologist whose explorations into female hysteria created a sensation in late-19th-century Paris and influenced a young student named Sigmund Freud. Now he is the unlikely subject of the New Stage Theatre's visually striking but thematically simplistic new work Some Historic/Some Hysterical. Using lecture transcripts, cocreators Jessica Sofia Mitrani and Ildiko Lujza Nemeth (who also directs) re-create a surreal version of Charcot's bizarre and highly popular "Tuesday Lectures," in which the public was invited to Salpêtrière hospital to watch patients enact their neurological maladies. Mitrani and Nemeth smartly view these public forums as more akin to vaudeville than medicine, and cast the cold, manipulative Charcot (Markus Hirnigel) as a sort of ringmaster to an unhappy menagerie of freaks and trained beasts.



STRONG MEDICINE Hirnigel makes the ladies swoon. Photograph: Jonathan Slaff

However, the artists' conclusions do not range far beyond the easy ideas that Charcot's studies were odious and perverse, and that his subjects were possibly made hysterical by their very treatments. The production is best when it stops talking (the tedious Icon, played by Gaby Schafer, provides running commentary) and traffics only in disturbing visions, such as a sequence in which the patients robotically take a spot of tea, or the super-creepy finale when the miserable hysterics drift into the audience. More arresting still is a woman (Denice Kondik) in a red-and-black-patterned gown who is seemingly pinned to wallpaper of the identical design for the duration of the show. Everything we need to know is there in the pained look on Kondik's perfectly frozen face. — Robert Simonson



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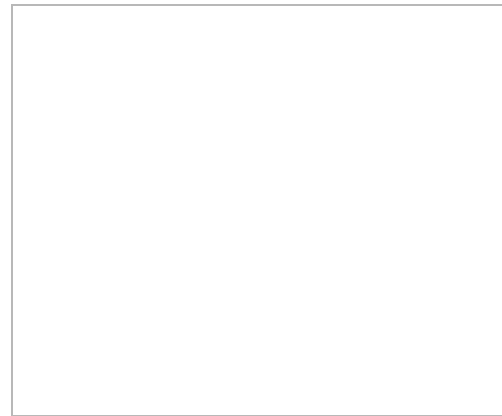
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