

ART REVIEW; Gee, It's Got Soup Cans? That Figures

By BEN BRANTLEY

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Andy Warhol goes to hell. As a travelogue, you have to admit, it has potential: art's ultimate voyeur roaming through corridors of fire with his glazed stare and faux-naif demeanor, bumping into more celebrities than even he could have dreamed of and making observations like, "Gee, I didn't know that Hitler was so short."

For Anne Bogart, however, the priest of Pop in the underworld is no occasion for levity. In "Culture of Desire," her theatrical sermon on Warhol's America that opened last night at the New York Theater Workshop, the experimental director makes it clear that she's not seduced by Warhol's surface-fixated art or his famously disaffected persona. In this flat, finger-wagging piece of whimsy, inspired by Dante's "Inferno," Warhol is sent to hell to suffer for the wrongs of a society that he embodied in extreme.

Ms. Bogart, who brought far more theatrical wit to her 1994 look at Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium," presents Warhol as a deeply frightened, unattractive little man, made to feel inadequate by the idealized images of mass advertising. His appropriation of those images was, of course, what made him famous. But in "Culture," which was collectively created by Ms. Bogart and members of the Saratoga International Theater Institute, this is an empty victory: Warhol is the ultimate victim as well as the ultimate manipulator of the false promises of Madison Avenue and Hollywood.

When Warhol, played as a sniveling supernerd by the actress Kelly Maurer, takes his Dante-esque journey below, he finds people looking vaguely like underground superstars pushing shopping carts and chanting commercial slogans and brand names. There are recited quotations from "The Divine Comedy," interviews with the real Warhol and stiff-sounding analyses of consumer psychology. There is also critical commentary on his paintings from the evening's Virgil, a man dressed in the image of Diana Vreeland who provides scholarly analysis in an arch and self-doubting tone.

The show's pivotal trick is to have Warhol deliver characteristic pronouncements in uncharacteristic ways. When he exclaims, as his real-life model was wont to, "You're a beauty," or "That's great," it is with a taunting, contemptuous sneer. When he speaks of living blankly and apart from others, it is in the whine of a wounded adolescent. The pose from his most famous self-portrait is evoked from time to time, but the posture is not allowed to reign in hell. The backdrop in Neil Patel's clinical supermarket set (superbly lighted by Mimi Jordan Sherin) is not from a Warhol silk-screen but a Blakean image of infernal sufferers.

O.K., so Warhol wasn't as cool, on any level, as he pretended to be. He was eternally terrified (his being shot by Valerie Solanis is evoked frequently), self-disgusted and starved for affection and approval. Is anyone learning anything new here? This hectoring production says nothing about Warhol, or about the country he mirrored, that wasn't said by his earliest detractors. Repetition may have been an asset in Warhol's art. It definitely isn't here.

CULTURE OF DESIRE

Concept/direction by Anne Bogart; creation/ performance, the SITI Company; sets by Neil Patel; lighting by Mimi Jordan Sherin; costumes by James Schuette. The SITI Company, City Theater and Portland Stage production presented by New York Theater Workshop. At 79 East Fourth Street, East Village.

WITH: Kelly Maurer, Akiko Aizawa, J. Ed Araiza, Ellen Lauren, Jefferson Mays, Karenjune Sanchez and Stephen Webber.