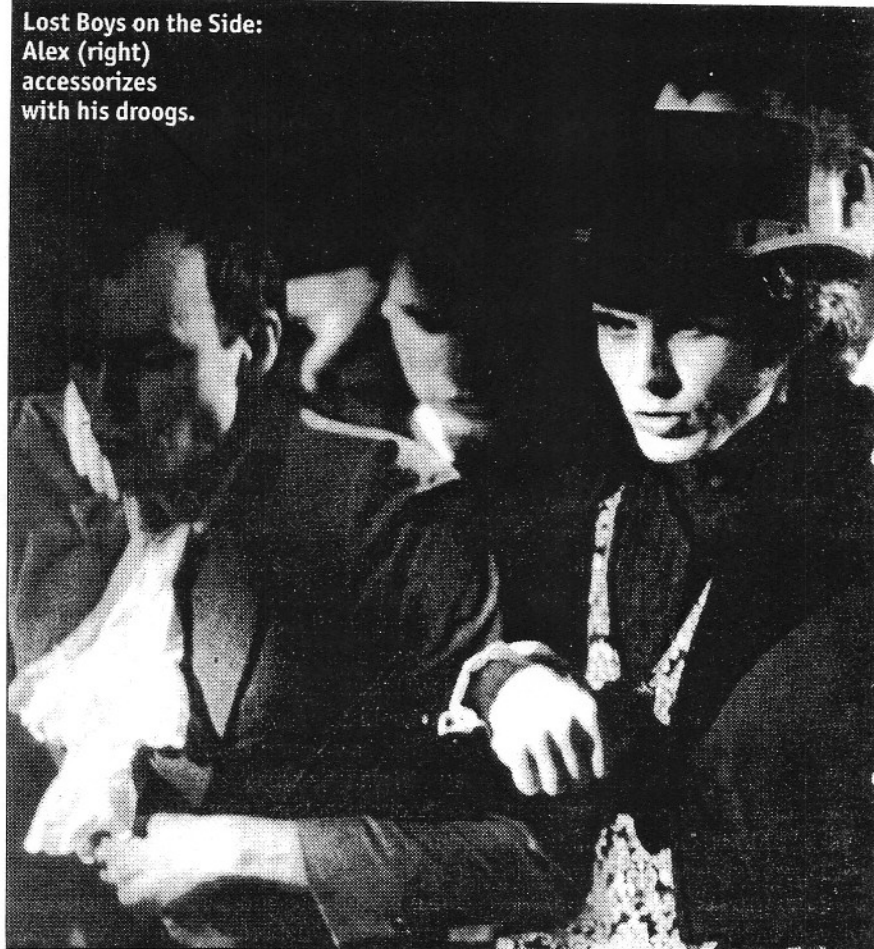


Future Tense

Lost Boys on the Side:
Alex (right)
accessorizes
with his droogs.



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By Trey Graham

A Clockwork Orange

By Anthony Burgess

Directed by Mike Chamberlin

At Studio Theatre Secondstage to March 4

There is this about the dystopian future of *A Clockwork Orange*: Luxury and lethal violence lie close abed. Street punks in cutaway coats menace old ladies in marabou-trimmed satin, and the chief mayhem-maker is as devoted to Beethoven as he is to the brutal amusements that occupy him after dark—indeed, they are for him hopelessly bound up with one another, and at an especially visceral level. If there is a sense of a segmented society in Anthony Burgess' story, of privileged folk who barricade their doors against the rough world of the night street, the two worlds are inextricably linked by their common humanity, and Mike Chamberlin's industrial-futurist production for Studio Secondstage blends the textures of us and them as atmospherically as even a Kubrick fan could wish.

Scott McKenzie is Bad Boy Alex, Burgess' oddly magnetic narrator, sweaty and sexy and outfitted for evening in top hat and tailcoat, cod-piece and combat boots. The lead-pipe cane he carries to complete the ensemble emphasizes that violence is just another means of self-expression, a fashion statement scrawled in his victims' blood. He's a charismatic Lost Boy, leader of a hooligan crew he calls "droogs," a thrill-addicted urban hyena whose smash-'em-up, fuck-'em-up frolics lead to a prison stint and thence to an

experimental rehabilitation regime as sadistic as any of his crimes.

He and his boys move through a black-box nightscape in the Church Street space that used to be Woolly Mammoth's (and was Studio's home before that). His streets are the empty playing area between seats clumped at the compass points; his hangouts, his prison, his parents' home are defined in turn by Peter N. Joyce's hot splashes of light and by panels of Plexiglas and steel, courtesy of set designer Giorgios Tsapas, that actors realign time and again to hem each other in. They wear Victorian-punker get-ups with lace collars and elaborate waistcoats, courtesy of Kathleen Geldard and LeVonne Lindsay; the Korova Milkbar, where Alex and his droogs fortify themselves with drug-spiked drinks, is a place of plush velvet sofas and bruised, lingerie-clad ladies à la *Cabaret*.

As might be expected from a director so concerned with style, Chamberlin also traffics in camp. It's as though he thinks that we, having developed a skin thick enough for the violence of *Natural Born Killers* and an appetite for the curious pathologies of *Hannibal*, can't be expected to shiver at the comparatively pale uglinesses that pass for "ultraviolence" in Burgess' dark Tomorrowland.

So, too, with totalitarianism: Irony is the expected reaction these days to most of the issues Burgess puts in play, so Chamberlin offers up for our derision a pederast priest, a pair of parents straight out of *Pleasantville*, and a mad doctor complete with

twitch, monocle, and maniacal laugh. (Pencil in a Helen Hayes nomination for Suzanne Richard, for her singularly committed performance in this

and a notably different second role.) It's all inarguably funny, but the mocking edge cuts ever so slightly against the grain of Burgess' novella, a document too concerned with its own quasi-musical structure—and with theologically inspired arguments about self-determination—to spend much energy on cynicism.

Not everything is a joke, of course. Chamberlin tightens the screws on the roughest spots, staging a pair of rape scenes that build, one upon the other, to a genuinely uncomfortable intensity. One moment in the second, in particular, is a striking directorial fillip involving a

table, a cowering woman, and a wash of hot light on a square of white flooring; the cumulative effect is of a target as supremely vulnerable as though she were already naked.

At two-and-a-half hours, with two intermissions, you'd expect the

stage version of *Clockwork* to be a bit of a chore, but Chamberlin and his cast keep events moving briskly along. McKenzie and his boys (Andrew Boyle, Patrick Bussink, and C.L. Hopkins) rattle off the curious futurespeak Burgess created for them without noticeable difficulty or excess self-consciousness, helping keep things from getting tedious. Alex's Beethoven fixation, first evoked when a thinly clad Milkbar tart (Kimberley Cooper) sings a plaintive excerpt from the "Ode to Joy," provides more than one vivid moment (along with fodder for one of the play's major arguments). Even the homoerotic overtones and the over-the-top quality of the prison and re-education sequences, while they strip some weight from Burgess' philosophizing, contribute to the evening's general snappiness, and certainly it's impossible to complain about set elements as retro-fabulous as the sci-fi leftovers that litter Dr. Brodsky's mad-scientist lab.

Things do drag toward the very end, as Burgess meanders his way toward a conclusion that will seem hopelessly optimistic to most of today's audiences, and there are moments (mostly fight scenes of one sort or another) that could be tighter. The real disappointment, though, is that for all its arguments about the brutishness of society and the necessity of moral choice, *A Clockwork Orange* has a bit less heft than you might expect. Its creator may have considered it a trifle, just a clever formal exercise, but his cult and Kubrick's have built a legend for it nonetheless.

CP



Scream Test:
Richard aces
her role as
Dr. Brodsky.

