

Marisol



The Artistic Home (see Resident companies). By José Rivera. Dir. John Mossman. With Marta Evans, Leslie Ann Sheppard, Brandon Thompson. 2hrs; one intermission.

A visionary masterpiece about American identity and political conflict, with angelic visitations at its center, debuted in 1993. But it wasn't Rivera's *Marisol*. The Puerto Rican-born playwright's fantasia on pre-Giuliani New York plays a little like *Angels in America*'s swaggering, scattered sibling. Bronx resident Marisol Perez (Evans) eludes death at the hands of a golf-club-wielding homeless man (Andrew Marikis), only to learn from a renegade angel (Sheppard) that a heavenly war has seeped into the metropolitan landscape, transforming huge stretches of it into a Big Apple Snake Plissken would recognize, with roaming bands of neo-Nazis setting the homeless aflame and random citizens suddenly transmuted into pillars of salt.

Rivera's poetic script is often brilliantly and disturbingly suggestive of the urban divides of race and class that marked its moment, though its flights of imagery don't always completely coalesce. The performances in Mossman's revival, ranging from energetic to histrionic, at times underscore the more contrived aspects of the playwright's writing. Evans, though, makes an appealing, plucky hero, handling the switch from office drone to unwilling combatant in a cosmic street war with humor and resilience, while Marikis memorably delivers one of the play's most compelling moments as a man almost completely covered in burn scars and in a wheelchair. The production features some quite strong design work; the soundscape by Adam Smith, in particular, evokes a New York before the East Village became an NYU dorm.—*John Beer*



WINGS OF DESIRE
Evans appeals to her better angels.

SHOW OF THE WEEK



ANOTHER MEAN WORLD
Letts, left, commiserates with Barrie.

Middletown

Always being in the middle of things, Eno's brilliant new work reminds us, is an uncertain but unavoidable endeavor. Making its Chicago debut after bowing in New York last fall, *Middletown* feels like a continuation—perhaps a culmination—of the playwright's previous works such as *Tragedy: A Tragedy* and *Thom Pain* (based on *nothing*): meditations on the big existential questions of life and death, and the ways language helps us cope with our dearth of answers.

Mapped onto a small town that's defined, literally, by its location between other points, *Middletown* is structured a bit like *Our Town* with doubt (though, pointedly, there's no



Steppenwolf Theatre Company (see Resident companies). By Will Eno. Dir. Les Waters. With ensemble cast. 2hrs 20mins; one intermission.

Stage Manager nor a third-act afterlife, as those would imply omniscience and answers). Our "main two," as one character puts it, are new resident Mary Swanson (a luminous Brenda Barrie), longing to start a family with her often-absent husband, and lifelong Middletowner John Dodge (a flinty, searching Tracy Letts), a lonely, depressive odd-jobber.

Most of *Middletown*'s residents, it seems, are lonely. Through the first three-quarters of Eno's script, they're identified only by their occupations: Cop (Danny McCarthy), Librarian (Martha Lavey), Mechanic (Michael Patrick Thornton), Female Doctor (Ora Jones). Suddenly, there's a shift; Eno's characters begin addressing each other by names, and you sense the members of this outstanding ensemble instantly adding facets to their portrayals by dint of their human connections to others. Not everyone will go for Eno's quippy, epigrammatic approach. But if you're down with exploring the middle without necessarily reaching an end, you've found your place.—*Kris Vire*

Educating Rita



Shattered Globe Theatre (see Fringe & storefront). By Willy Russell. Dir. Richard Corley. With Whitney White, Brad Woodard. 2hrs 40mins; one intermission.

Russell's 1980 work could be viewed as a *Pygmalion* for the Thatcher era: Working-class hairdresser Rita—an assumed name, taken in honor of author Rita Mae Brown—comes to self-loathing, alcoholic poetry professor Frank in search of tutoring under the U.K.'s Open University system. Over the course of a bazillion meetings in Frank's dusty office, where he hides bottles of booze behind his books, Rita inches toward a "proper" education that might damp her unique spark, while Frank too

changes as he grows accustomed to her face.

It's the kind of play that announces its intentions in every line. "I have got a lot to learn, haven't I!" Rita exclaims early on; later, declaring her autonomy from her mentor, she quotes Eliza Doolittle directly: "I can do without you." We're able to track the static, schematic outline of the story several steps ahead of the characters. White, an appealing young actress who's hummed with electricity in shows like *About Face*'s *Stupid Kids* and *Bailiwick*'s *Passing Strange*, is oddly muted as the purportedly garish Rita. Woodard, meanwhile, overstates Frank's shambolic misery. Could be the actors are hamstrung by Russell's insistence on underlining every theme and explicating every metaphor; they're left with nothing to play.—*Kris Vire*



NO HOLDS BARD
White gets excited for Shakespeare.

PHOTOS: TOP: MICHAEL BROSLIN; LEFT, TIM KNIGHT; RIGHT, KEVIN VOL