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## Revival Works a Transformation

By BEN BRANTLEY

It takes more than two to dance the tango of love, lust and loneliness that is Lanford Wilson's "Burn This." In the soulful, eye-opening new revival at the Union Square Theater, which features a sensational cast led by Edward Norton and Catherine Keener, a character alludes to a dance piece as less a pas de deux than a pas de quatre.

That, in fact, is what Mr. Wilson has created in this drama from 1987. "You have bodies, space, sculptural mass, distance, relationships," says the choreographer portrayed by Ms. Keener, defining what she does for a living. Distance is the operative word. Translating those same elements in dramatic terms, "Burn This" emerges as an exquisitely arranged chamber piece for four self-distancing people who have misplaced their deepest feelings.

This equation may sound off kilter to theatergoers who saw "Burn This" on Broadway 15 years ago, when the play seemed to be mostly about one wild and crazy guy. That was because a young actor named John Malkovich, poised for international stardom, took a flashy part and ran with it at warp speed.

Though the estimable cast included another vital star-in-the-making, Joan Allen, "Burn This" registered principally as an entertaining showcase for a showoff. I left the theater thinking that while Mr. Malkovich was an exceptional presence, "Burn This" was not an exceptional play.

Ouch! How wrong I was. Under the finely balanced direction of James Houghton, this thoughtful revival, which opened last night, brings out the flickering shadows as well as the histrionic fire. Not that the fiercely talented Mr. Norton, known for films like "Primal Fear" and "American History X," doesn't blaze in the role created by Mr. Malkovich, that of a coke-snorting, combustibly hyper restaurant manager. But he doesn't burn so bright that he blinds you to what lies beneath the surface or to what's happening around him.

The same approach infuses the entire production, whose four-member ensemble is ideally rounded out by Ty Burrell and Dallas Roberts. In turning down the flame a notch — by slowing down the pace and letting pauses breathe — Mr. Houghton and his cast reveal a poetic blueprint that wasn't evident before and elicit new degrees of mortal chill and human warmth.

"Burn This" is the inaugural offering of a season devoted to Mr. Wilson's works by the Signature Theater Company, where Mr. Houghton is the artistic director. The troupe's mission is to shed new light on the careers of living American dramatists, and it definitely helped refocus New York audiences on the work of Edward Albee, Adrienne Kennedy and Horton Foote. Yet no Signature production that I've seen has been quite as revelatory as "Burn This."

Not that Mr. Wilson has fallen into obscurity, any more than Mr. Albee had when Signature took him on eight years ago. Mr. Wilson, after all, is the author of "The Hot I Baltimore," "The Fifth of July" and the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Talley's Folly," works that regularly show up on syllabuses for American drama courses.

Yet with the commercial failure of "Redwood Curtain" on Broadway in 1993, Mr. Wilson's luster began to dim. There was a feeling that his sentimental portraits of eccentric, dispossessed outsiders belonged to an earlier time, an era still

flavored with the individual-worshipping whimsy of the 1960's.

It's true that "Burn This" has a sentimental streak that pushes it toward contrivance in its second half. And it can be embarrassingly literal in showing how its characters translate life into art. But it also presents a bracingly clear-eyed portrait of an age of disconnectedness, a state in which American life still seems firmly lodged. It's not just the updated topical references (to things like cellphones and Bjork) that keep "Burn This" from feeling like a period piece.

Mr. Wilson's brooding sense of people defensively estranged from one another and their own emotions still rings hauntingly true, even within the collective grief and fear inspired by the epochal events of Sept. 11. Indeed, there's a fresh pertinence to the play's portrayal of characters trying to make sense of their crowded existences in the face of a wrenching tragedy and discovering, as one of them says, that she has never really had a personal life.

This observation is brought about by the death of a young dancer named Robbie in a boating accident with his boyfriend. The play begins shortly after Robbie's funeral, which has been attended by his roommates, Anna (Ms. Keener), a dancer and choreographer, and Larry (Mr. Roberts), an ad man. The loft they have returned to seems cavernously empty, not only because their friend is gone, but also because their visit to his blue-collar hometown has revealed a Robbie they never knew.

How this forces the characters to reconsider their own identities and relationships is what gives "Burn This" its compellingly fluid shape. The process is realized most conventionally in an anxious romantic triangle made up of Anna; Burton (Mr. Burrell), her longtime patrician boyfriend; and Pale (Mr. Norton), Robbie's perpetually overwrought brother, who arrives in their lives as an explosive catalyst.

But there's a more complex geometry at work. As Anna vacillates between the ferocious exoticism of Pale and the comfortable familiarity of Burton, other emotional combinations come into play. You become aware of the provisional, insular union forged by Anna and Larry, who is gay, and of the subtle electric current that runs between Larry and Burton. And when Anna and Pale are alone together, Robbie's spectral presence is always a third party.

This is all acted out on a set, designed with knowing detail by Christine Jones, that tellingly summons the wide open spaces common to converted lofts in Manhattan. It is an easy place both to keep your distance and to lose sight of others. (Burton, a screenwriter, is aptly working on a project that deals with "the distance between people.") The same feeling is reflected in the chiaroscuro of Pat Collins's lighting, which periodically transforms the figures onstage into ambiguous silhouettes.

It is, however, as it should be, the performers who most affectingly embody this isolating sensibility. It comes across in the way Ms. Keener's Anna shuts out other people in mid-conversation by hunching over and letting her hair screen her face.

It's equally evident in the way Mr. Roberts's angular postures embody what Larry calls his "protective sense of humor," and in the complicitous glances he exchanges with Anna, confirming their status as the sole members of an exclusive club based on irony.

You're also always conscious of how Burton and Pale wear their very different personas, respectively low-key and high-flying, like battle gear. It seems especially appropriate in this production that when Pale puts the moves on Anna shortly after meeting her, it's while her back is to him and he is smelling her hair. And when Anna later reinvites him into her bed, she does so silently and abjectly without ever meeting his eyes.

The Broadway production of "Burn This," directed by Marshall W. Mason, presented Anna and Pale as a latter-day Blanche and Stanley of "A Streetcar Named Desire," a sort of "lady and a tramp" dichotomy. It's true that the foul-mouthed Pale says Stanley-like things. ("You're a real different person in the sack than you are standing up.")

But Mr. Norton and Ms. Keener, two of the brighter talents of independent film these days, provide more nuanced variations on the theme. There's nothing brittle about Ms. Keener's Anna, no porcelain-doll fragility. She instead emanates an organic, self-contained strength and purposefulness that makes her sudden, self-surprising confusion all the more touching. It's a beautifully natural, unshowy performance that grows on you by stealth.

Pale, a hot-wired restaurant manager who might have stepped out of Anthony Bourdain's "Kitchen Confidential," is inevitably showy. And Mr. Norton does splendidly by Pale's cocaine-fueled diatribes. But even as he captures the audience with fireworks, Mr. Norton never lets you forget the pain and anxiety that produce the pyrotechnics. He's the primal scream version of what everyone else is feeling.

Mr. Burrell and Mr. Roberts eloquently convey their characters' capacities for being wounded. One of the evening's high points is a dialogue between Larry and Burton in which they wind up hurting each other despite themselves. In the process, each reveals more raw emotion than he had intended.

For these are people for whom extravagant displays of feeling are anathema. "Where's the pain? Where's the joy? Where's the ebullience?" asks Burton, speaking of the characters in his own work. But as Anna answers, everything doesn't have to be epic. And the performers here show that a simple, abrupt turning of the head can be as resonant as a full-throated cry.

The play's title, by the way, comes from something Burton says about art: "Make it personal, tell the truth and then write 'Burn this' on the bottom."

Yet even in the denial of the postscript, there is illumination. The match Anna strikes in the shadows at the beginning of the play turns out to be an echoing metaphor in this rich and compassionate production. "Burn This" cherishes every involuntary spark of feeling that suddenly lights up the darkness.

### **BURN THIS**

By Lanford Wilson; directed by James Houghton; set by Christine Jones; costumes by Jane Greenwood; lighting by Pat Collins; sound by Robert Kaplowitz; original music by Loren Toolajian; fight direction, J. Steven White; production stage manager, Michael McGoff; general manager, Roy Gabay; producing associate, Elizabeth Timperman; production manager, Chris Moses. Presented by the Signature Theater Company, Mr. Houghton, founding artistic director. At the Union Square Theater, 100 East 17th Street, Manhattan.

WITH: Catherine Keener (Anna), Ty Burrell (Burton), Dallas Roberts (Larry) and Edward Norton (Pale).

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