

# THE Arts

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## Humbert Humbert (Conjuring Nymphet)

MONTCLAIR, N.J. — Part of the brilliance of Nabokov's "Lolita," that scandalous, disconcerting novel in which a middle-aged European man of culture takes

pedophilic liberties with an adolescent American girl, resides in its manifold layers of ambiguity, its openness to interpretation. Is Humbert Humbert a suave, calculating seducer or a pretentious, delusional monster? Might he also be a relatable victim, not only of his own urges but also those of Dolores Haze, the child with whom he is obsessed?

"Lolita: An Imagined Opera," presented in its American premiere on Friday night as part of Montclair State University's vibrant Peak Performances series, adopts the monster view. The 70-minute work, composed by Joshua Fineberg and directed by Jim Clayburgh of the Belgian theater company Joji Inc., is less an opera in any conventional sense than a multimedia monodrama: the actor François Beukelaers, a Humbert caged within what amounts to a courtroom dock in front of the stage, recounts episodes from the book in chronological sequence.

Just as Humbert narrates Nabokov's novel, so does this adaptation focus on Humbert's representation of events. Mr. Beukelaers delivers most of his testimony with his back to the audience, peering into cameras that trans-



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fer his visage, with a jaundiced tint, onto a translucent screen above the stage. Bits of his narration, electronically distorted, swirled around the auditorium through loudspeakers, along with fragments of children's songs and, eventually, the computer-rendered voice of Lolita herself.

Behind Mr. Beukelaers's projected face, two dancers — Johanne Saunier, the choreographer, and Julie Verbinnen — flexed and twitched with a disconcerting mix of prurience and vulnerability. (Their blond wigs and heart-shaped sunglasses sucked Stanley Kubrick's film into the matrix.) On screens to either side, Kurt d'Haeseleer's video footage offered evocative glimpses of what Humbert has perceived in his surroundings: a nymphet floating within a veiny Sargasso entanglement; blurring highway stripes; banal picket-fence suburbs; fluorescent light fixtures.

The complex staging, brilliantly executed, pulled you deep inside Humbert's increasingly manic obsession. Mr. Beukelaers offered a bravura display of confidence, rage and self-pity, his thin leer and high-flown, thickly accented oratory powerfully conveying Humbert's arrogance and condescension. At times Mr. Beukelaers's vehement bark fused

**Lolita: An Imagined Opera** *The actor François Beukelaers at Montclair State University.*

into torrents of incoherent protest.

Members of the Argento Chamber Ensemble, seated in a concert configuration on the stage and conducted by Michel Galante, expertly shrieked and shuddered in tones of agitation and enervation while metallic groans and childlike coos encircled the audience. If there is a shortcoming to this "Lolita," it is in the remorselessness of Mr. Fineberg's instrumental writing, seemingly too preoccupied with undercutting Humbert's delusions to suggest sympathy or to illuminate the specifically American dimensions of Nabokov's novel.

But to isolate the music is a mistake: this opera amounted to considerably more than the sum of its parts. The production's distancing effects and vortex of simultaneous, contradictory sensations — Humbert's lurid, oversize face flanked by placid vistas; volatile accusations proclaimed in a computer's inflectionless tones; glimpses of flesh stripped of titillation through uncomfortably frenetic gesticulations — made for a potent experience of profoundly claustrophobic unease.