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Donna Summer sang a lot more than just disco.

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In some places, the best place to see the leaves is from the water.

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Arts

The New York Times



A Big Puddle of Mud Plays a Role Onstage

'Tom at the Farm,' a drama about a man visiting his dead lover's farm, employs a slippery set in Rodrigo Portella's production.

By ELISABETH VINCENTELLI

In 2017, Armando Babaioff was performing in a production of Michel Marc Bouchard's "Tom at the Farm" in Rio de Janeiro, and was looking forward to having Bouchard see the new staging. But when Bouchard, a Quebecois playwright, arrived, he thought he was in the wrong place.

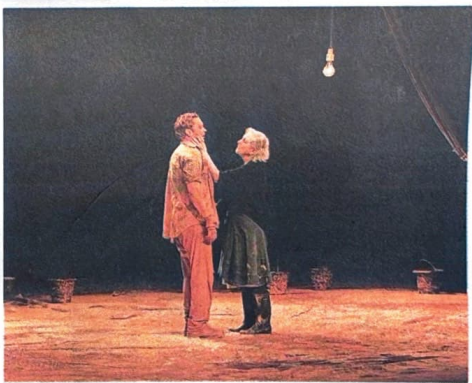
Originally written in French, the play is set on a Canadian dairy farm. In Rio, Bouchard "saw buckets, a plastic tarp, a microphone, a pair of boots, and he went, 'No, it's not here, and left,'" said Babaioff, who translated the play into Portuguese and led the Rio cast. (Someone from the production

grabbed Bouchard and he saw the show. And liked it.)

Those spare elements provide the aesthetic and ambience of the director Rodrigo Portella's production. They have also made it easy to move it around: Babaioff has performed "Tom at the Farm" around 600 times, all over the world, and until Saturday he's doing so at NYU Skirball. It then trans-

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In "Tom at the Farm," about 30 pounds of stage clay, top, adds mystery and even an inherent dramatic tension. Right, Armando Babaioff and Denise Del Vecchio onstage at NYU Skirball.



DEBORAH SOLOMON | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Alarm Over the Sale of an Artist's Studio

His foundation says the former home of Robert Rauschenberg isn't relevant. Others disagree.

IT SEEMED it would be there forever, that brick townhouse at 381 Lafayette Street in Manhattan, with its quaint red-painted front door. For years it served as the home and studio of Robert Rauschenberg, a deity of postwar American art. After he died, in 2008, his foundation stayed on in the building, and I often visited to see the changing exhibitions of his work or to research in the archive upstairs, lingering among his old papers and books and imbuing an uncanny sense of the artist's presence.

But the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation quietly listed the building for sale in August (no price was given), informing the staff only afterward, according to three people familiar with the planned sale who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly.

Courtney Martin, the foundation's executive director since 2024, said in an emailed statement, sent through a spokesperson, that the five-story building bears no great relevance to Rauschenberg's life or work. "Rauschenberg's worldview was not tied to a particular building or location," she wrote.

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Robert Rauschenberg in his Manhattan studio in 1966 and an exhibition there in 1973, with his work "Untitled (Venetian)"



JAMES PONIEWOZIK
TELEVISION REVIEW

Taking On Technology Goliaths

'Cupertino,' a timely new CBS drama from 'The Good Wife' team, makes A.I. the case.

I'M NOT SAYING "Cupertino" was created by a benevolent superintelligence from the future and sent back in time to warn us. But you almost have to wonder.

The timing is too perfect. You have backlash against data centers, warnings from artificial intelligence researchers that their products might permanently delete mankind and OpenAI's Sam Altman saying that "The world should accept some bad things happening" in the course of building his trillion-dollar baby. And now here comes a clever topical drama, Thursday nights on CBS, about Silicon Valley's mammoth, dubious power and about a tiny law firm trying to stand against it. (It also streams on Paramount+.)

The timing is less of a surprise, however, when you realize that "Cupertino" comes

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A Puddle of Mud Plays a Role

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VINCENT PULLO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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els to the Barbican in London, where it'll run Oct. 13-17.

"I was 36 years old, and now I am 45," Babaioff said. "My body is changing, and the world has changed a lot, but the play didn't age one second. Here, in Edinburgh, in Paris, in Belgium, in Korea, the stories of the people are the same."

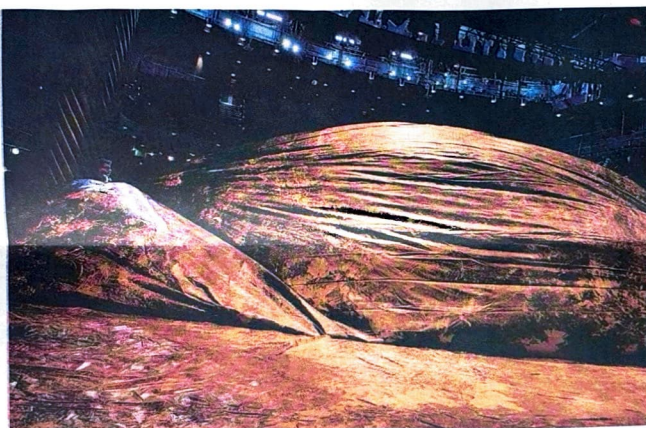
Babaioff plays Tom, a graphic designer who is visiting the farm of Agatha (Denise Del Vecchio, the respected Brazilian stage veteran) and Francis (Iano Salomão). The occasion is the funeral for Tom's lover — their son and brother Agatha seems to ignore the fact her son had been gay, while Francis clearly despises it. The story unfolds in a tense atmosphere of secrecy and lies in which violence is always bubbling under the surface, and sometimes spills over.

Tom kicks off the show, presented with English subtitles, by describing the family house he's discovering. "A wood stove with a chimney. Balcony. And a microwave. Rug. Table," he says, in part.

All we get from the set designer Aurora dos Campos, however, are a single bulb hanging from the ceiling and nails dotting an otherwise empty stage that's entirely covered with a dark tarp speckled with dried reddish clay. "It is the color of Brazil," Babaioff said, rubbing some of it on his fingers in a conversation backstage. "The color of the countryside, of the farms."

Babaioff discovered Bouchard's play in 2014, when a friend asked if he wanted to see the Xavier Dolan film adaptation in Rio. A dedicated theater actor, he decided to read the source material instead. "Homosexuals learn to lie before they learn to love," Babaioff said, quoting a line from Bouchard's preface to the script. "I understood in that moment in my bed, reading the play, that I was in front of something powerful."

From then on he was on a quest. He wrote Bouchard's agent about the rights, laying out "the problematic situation that we're living in Brazil." (In addition to endemic issues, a presidential campaign had stirred up debates about corruption and government policies.) The plea was effective: "I



Top, workers preparing the NYU Skirball for "Tom at the Farm." Clockwise from above: the otherwise empty stage is covered with a dark tarp speckled with reddish clay; the actor Armando Babaioff's hand.

bought the rights for less than — I don't know, but it's like minus, minus, minus, minus," Babaioff said, laughing. The rural setting was moved to Brazil, and Portella came up with the idea of mud, which carries a lot of symbolic meanings — creation, farm animals, a swamp.

About 30 pounds of stage clay adds mystery and even an inherent dramatic tension. The tarp can be slippery, and it bunches when stepped on, which requires the actors to be a little cautious when they move about.

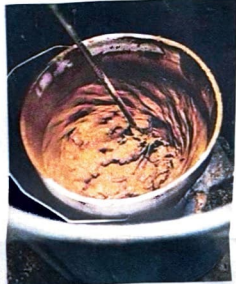
"The absence of stability is the base of our work," Babaioff said.

As it becomes splashed with water, the tarp gets stickier, spattering the actors and eventually covering Babaioff in a thin film

("it's good for the skin," he joked).

The metaphorical is personal, too. Asked about the character of Agatha, who is a lot more complicated than first assumed, Babaioff simply said, "She's my mother. I had to do the play to create a new relationship with my mother." And that involved coming out to her. But, he said, "it was easy." He mentioned that his mother, a seamstress, used to instruct him to "speak tough" when he was a kid. In retrospect he understood she had been afraid for him and was trying to protect him.

Babaioff has a host of plans these days, including directing, but his belief in the importance of "Tom at the Farm" has not faded. "It's an honor to keep doing this," he said.



Michelle Obama Praises Jacqueline Kennedy's Vision

In an essay, the former first lady looks at past White House restorations.

BY JENNIFER SCHUESSLER

Since leaving the White House, Michelle Obama has sometimes sharply spoken her mind about President Trump's policies and leadership. Now, she seems to have delivered her thoughts on another subject: his efforts to radically reshape the White House itself.

In an essay about Jacqueline Kennedy published on Thursday as part of a presidential history initiative, Mrs. Obama extols the efforts by her fellow former first lady to make the White House a nurturing home for her two young children while also embarking on a restoration that protected the building's history.

"She had the foresight and humility to recognize the People's House not as an extension of herself, but as a tribute to our nation's history," Mrs. Obama writes. "She recognized that first families come and go. It's the beauty of the nation they serve that lasts."

The essay also highlights the contributions of Nancy Reagan, Pat Nixon, Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush, who followed in Mrs. Kennedy's footsteps with "considered, thought-

ful updates" to various rooms in the Executive Mansion. The essay does not mention Mr. Trump or the current first lady, Melania Trump, but it does include a quotation from Mrs. Kennedy that might be read as a comment on Mr. Trump's enthusiasm for the role of remodeler in chief.

"Everything in the White House," in Mrs. Kennedy's words, "must have a reason for being there. It would be sacrilege merely to 'redecorate' it — a word I hate. It must be restored."

The essay is the latest installment of In Pursuit, an online series about every U.S. president up to Barack Obama (and some first ladies) with contributions from a bipartisan mix of historians and prominent citizens, including Mr. Obama and Bill Clinton; Mrs. Clinton and Mrs. Bush; and Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr.

The series, organized by the civics group More Perfect, is nonpartisan and focused on history. But some of the contributions have carried some contemporary political edge. In the leadoff essay, about George Washington, George W. Bush hailed the first president's "humility" and his efforts to ensure the United States "wouldn't become a monarchy, or worse."

Mrs. Obama's essay does not directly mention the East Wing, which Mr. Trump demolished last year to make way for a ball-



Laura Bush and Michelle Obama in the White House in 2009. Mrs. Obama has written an essay hailing several former first ladies for their "tribute to our nation's history."

'It's the beauty of the nation they serve that lasts.'

room. She previously characterized the demolition as a denigration of the role of first ladies, who have traditionally had their offices there.

She also does not mention the Rose Garden, a signature contribution of Mrs. Kennedy that Mr. Trump ripped out and replaced with a paved patio reminiscent of one at Mar-a-Lago. Both those changes were made without any formal review process.

Mrs. Obama emphasizes that she and other first ladies, when making changes to the White House, worked closely with scholars and preservationists to "advise on and approve our plans."

"Regardless of party, our families understood that winning an election didn't grant us the deed to a few acres of prime real estate to remake in our own image," she writes.

A representative for Mrs. Obama did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Thursday.

In her essay, Mrs. Obama also highlights Mrs. Kennedy's role in the creation in 1961 of the White House Historical Association, a nonprofit group dedicated to preserving and promoting the building's history.

That group, which is independent from the government, has been criticized by some historians and former staff members for not joining other preservation groups in challenging the East Wing demolition.

In an essay posted online in September, the group's president, Stewart D. McClaurin, said its role was not to support or oppose any particular alterations to the White House, but to preserve and teach the building's history "through every presidency."

Before the East Wing demolition, he said, the group spent \$2 million to document the space through three-dimensional scanning and photography. Historic furnishings and objects were removed and preserved.

"Our obligation is to preserve the record faithfully and completely," he said.