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Critic's Choice Antaeus Theatre Company clarifies the bad behavior of 'Hedda Gabler'



Jaimi Paige is Hedda and Daniel Blinkoff plays her old flame in Antaeus Theatre Company's 1920s-set production of "Hedda Gabler." (Karianne Flaathen)



By **Daryl H. Miller** · Contact Reporter

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The Antaeus company's "Hedda Gabler" is just what you want from a production of a classic play: It cracks open the text to reveal details that you hadn't fully noticed before.

Through the years, Henrik Ibsen's 1891 domestic drama has been papered over with analyses that haven't always matched his intentions. Steven Robman's staging in North Hollywood strips through all of that to remind us that this is, first and foremost, a riveting study of behavior — *extreme* behavior, to be sure, but these people aren't the monsters they sometimes seem. They're just a little closer to the abyss than we believe ourselves to be.

Robman moves the action ahead to the early 1920s. Right away, he gives us a glimpse of newly married Hedda in a short, black negligee and robe as she moves pensively around her expensive new drawing room. This is a far cry from the heavy, floor-length dresses in which we're used to seeing her. (The fashion-forward costumes are by Leah Piehl.) Similarly, the room, designed by Se Hyun Oh, is pristine white, rather than choking in Victorian darkness.

This Hedda might live in a brighter era of expanded freedom, but she is still constrained. She chafes at wifely subservience while men are free to behave as they please. Suffocated and bored, she acts out — anything to shake things up and give her a moment's release. Robman builds upon a fleet script by Andrew Upton.

In the title role, Jaimi Paige restlessly roams her gilded cage, sleek and aloof, turning to ice or fire as circumstances shift. (All roles are double cast. Paige alternates with Nike Doukas.)

Compared to Hedda, almost everyone else comes off as a mouse, especially JD Cullum as her academic husband, squeaking with little bursts of enthusiasm as he natters on about his dry-as-dust field of study. Such moments mine the play's humor, as does the delicious interplay between the husband and his devoted aunt, played by Lynn Milgrim, as she sweetly yet pointedly prods him for news of an impending pregnancy, all of which flies over his head.

Portraying an old flame of Hedda's, Daniel Blinkoff pompously enters as a newly minted celebrity but quickly unravels in the presence of the alluring, goading Hedda. Caught in the middle, Kwana Martinez is a captivating combination of glowing innocence and steely resolve.

Unfortunately for Hedda, the one person who is her equal is an old family friend who, as played by Tony Amendola, suavely struts around her home as if he owns the place, covertly attempting to coerce her into a liaison.

Each character aspires to things that prove beyond his or her grasp, and here lies Ibsen's most incisive observation: When dreams are quashed, life flips around to become, as Hedda puts it, "petty and dirty and vulgar."

“**Hedda Gabler**,” Antaeus Theatre Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Ends July 17. \$30 and \$34. (818) 506-1983, www.antaeus.org. Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes.

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