

Theatre Ghost

ANTAEUS' COMIC FLIGHT ALIGHTS ON "CLOUD 9"

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You don't want to go to a Caryl Churchill play after a heavy meal. The dean of modern British playwrights tells very funny, bawdy jokes — but you have to be wide awake to get them.

Her *Cloud 9* is as zany as a music-hall revue, as witty as Oscar Wilde, and bawdy? — well, the whole damn thing is about sex. Yet it's also one of her most complex plays, an intricate clockwork that has defeated more than one acting troupe in the last 35 years.

Act 1 begins in colonial Africa circa 1880; Act 2 ends in a London park, 100 years later. Most of the characters are in both acts — 'cause they only age 25 years. Moreover, each is played by a different actor than in Act 1. And sex? In both worlds — Victoria's and Thatcher's — they explore every combination, licit and illicit.



Bill Brochtrup, Bo Foxworth (photo: Geoffrey Wade)

Antaeus, a company focused on classics, has declared *Cloud 9* a classic and taken it on. And they're making a lovely job of it. Their *Cloud 9* is clear, fast-moving, bursting with humor from slapstick to intellectual ... and rich in things to talk over afterward.

Much of this is due to the sure hand of director Casey Stangl (who recently staged Churchill's most complex play, *Love and Information*, for San Francisco's ACT). On Stephanie Kerley Schwarz's instantly readable set — with a brilliantly used platform — Stangl deploys her characters swiftly, smoothly and with purpose.

Like the set, Leigh Allen's lighting and A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's costumes are immediate and clear, and Peter Bayne's sound design puts us in both worlds with occasional witty asides.

And then there's the cast. (Antaeus always uses two, and often mixes them; I can only speak to the ensemble I saw.)

Bo Foxworth's colonial governor Clive anchors Act 1 with naive stolidity, blind to his own contradictions; in Act 2, he is the imp of chaos as a pinafores pre-school girl. Bill Brochtrup steers a storm of stifled emotions as Clive's wife, Betty; then portrays her son Edward, finding his sexual and spiritual self in a *menage a trois*. Deborah Puette deftly creates the pre-pubescent Edward in Act 1, then transforms dazzlingly into Betty as a grey-coiffed divorcée. Liza de Weerd begins as Betty's utterly Victorian mother, and ends as her daughter, a woman emerging into her identity (who was portrayed by a rag doll in Act 1.)

Abigail Marks accomplishes the most breathtaking changes, shifting suddenly throughout Act 1 between Ellen the lovesick governess and Clive's powerful mistress, Mrs. Saunders. David DeSantos turns a quieter metamorphosis, from a barely closeted dashing explorer in Africa to a smothering, pseudo-feminist husband in modern London. And Chad Borden, with delightful restraint, gives us the deeply hidden black-hating black servant in Act 1, and a completely open and assertive gay man in Act 2.

As this list of characters makes obvious, *Cloud 9* is more tangled than a French farce. But the Antaeus troupe leads us through the twisting roller-coaster with perfect clarity and high humor. Of course, the laughs are on us — on our half-conscious, inherited notions of sex and power and race, our fantasies of "family" and "nation."

Which is what Churchill intends. But a zany comedy goes down so much better than a lecture, and lets us find the insights rather than being told them. Sometime in the next six weeks, swap your three-course meal for something lighter, and fill up on the hilarious adventure Antaeus is serving.

Cloud 9, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Casey Stangl.

Presented by Antaeus Theatre Company, at the Antaeus Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North

Hollywood 91601.

Thursdays and Fridays at 8:00,
Saturdays at 2:00 and 8:00,
Sundays at 2:00, through April 24.

Tickets: <www.Antaeus.org> or (818) 506-1983.