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## Cloud 9

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Antaeus has done it again: taken a modern classic (that does seem antithetical, when you stop to think on't) and brought it fully to life. Caryl Churchill's 1979 thoughtful comedy, "Cloud 9" directed by Casey Stengl, is a wondrous piece about power -- in the way we deal with gender and with race -- both in our faces today.

As ever, Antaeus has double-cast it, always a pleasure to view. This cast is "The Hotheads." It's set in two acts, one hundred years apart, although for the characters only 25 years has advanced. Act One, in 1879, is in some unnamed African colony, wherein the white characters fear the black natives and each other. And Act Two is in London in 1979, where the same characters are now played by other actors, generally of the opposite gender. And don't worry about following it; it's all perfectly simple and perfectly presented.

In the first act, Clive (Adam J. Smith), a Colonel in the British army, lives with his wife, Betty (JD Cullum), their two children, Edward (Gigi Bermingham), aged 8, and infant daughter, Victoria (an unnamed doll); the nanny, Maud (Joanna Strapp), who is secretly in love with Betty, and a native servant, Joshua (white actor John Allee). Visiting them in these strained times are Clive's close friend, Harry (Graham Hamilton), and Clive's mistress, the widow Saunders (Laura Wernette).

Ah, yes, an evening rife with possible confusions. Especially with the quick costume changes some of them have to navigate. The gender-bending works because the actors will it to be done seriously, and all the funnier for it. Cullum keeps proving his worth as a great actor (impossible to achieve before 40), making gentle Betty a rebel in petticoats. He's marvelous, as are the others. Allee makes no attempt to play "black"; just makes his dangerous thoughts active.

In Act Two, Smith is Cathy, the heavy-set daughter of Victoria (Strapp), who is unhappy in her marriage with Martin (Hamilton), willing to try co-habiting with Lin (Wernette), while brother Edward (Cullum), gay and eager to be slave/bottom to alienating bondage freak, Gerry (Allee), as well as living in a ménage-a-trois with his sister, Victoria, and Lin (don't ask; the head hurts). And it all works theatrically and socially.

This is an extraordinary script, with true-to-life symbols that expose their innards by being played by gender-benders. It's riotously funny, clever beyond words, and serious to boot.

The costuming is glorious (A. Jeffrey Schoenberg), both the Victorian excess and the contemporary mundane. Stephanie Kerley Schwartz's basic set design of backdrops making a skewed British flag is handily lit by Leigh Allen.

Stengl has managed it all exceptionally well, making it entertaining as all get-out. So, get out, dammit, and see it! You have to trust that it will hold you in its grip.

"Cloud 9" plays through April 24 at Antaeus Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd, North Hollywood 91601. For tickets or information, call 818-506-1983 or visit [www.Antaeus.org](http://www.Antaeus.org).

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