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THEATER REVIEW

Repression Expression

Noted playwright Caryl Churchill developed *Cloud 9* in collaboration with a company of actors, who drew on their personal experiences in helping create the work. A biting satirical farce that premiered in 1979, with cross-gender casting, it deals with conflicts engendered when people's natural sexual predilections are out of line with society's rigid expectations.

The script portrays an array of deviant behaviors from the so-called "norm": everything from standard heterosexual adultery to a threesome involving a gay man, his sister and her lesbian lover.

It's a difficult story to summarize and even more challenging to stage. The Antaeus Theatre Company's current production, directed by Casey Stangl, doesn't hit the mark in every regard, but it showcases a plethora of fine acting and scabrously funny moments, and affectingly brings home the message of a bril-

liant, prescient play.

The plot is famously nonlinear; act one takes place in 19th-century colonial Africa, while act two transpires a century later in a contemporary park in London.

Clive (Bo Foxworth), the pivotal figure in the first act, is your archetypal British male chauvinist, with undisputed authority over his household and his plantation.

His family consists of his fragile fluttery wife, Betty (JD Cullum); his effeminate son, Edward (Deborah Puette); his stiff-necked mother-in-law (Liza de Weerd); and his daughter, Victoria (represented by a rag doll). There is also a governess, Ellen (Laura Wernette), and a widowed neighbor, Mrs. Saunders (Wernette), beneath whose skirts the hypocritical Clive loves to frolic.

Except for his own flagrant dalliance, Clive is blind to others' wayward passions: the attraction of both his wife and young son for his chum, dashing explorer Harry (Graham Hamilton); Harry's homosexual proclivities, indulged in with both Edward and Clive's servant, Joshua (Chad Borden), and Ellen's obsession



Adam J. Smith as Clive, left, and JD Cullum as Betty

with his wife. Clive does note Edward's fondness for dolls, and his torment of the boy is front and center of act one.

The second act takes place in a London park circa the 1970s. Betty, now played by Puette, Edward (by Cullum) and Victoria (by de Weerd), are now 25 (not 100) years older, and though less miserably repressed, not very happy. The sweet and gentle Edward's been cruelly rebuffed by his philandering lover (Borden in

a vivid, incisive portrayal) while Betty is struggling to adapt to widowhood, and Victoria is suffering through an unhappy marriage.

Much hilarity is delivered by Foxworth (in a short pink dress and still sporting a mustache) as the 5-year-old, tantrum-throwing daughter of Victoria's gay admirer, Lin (Wernette). The play's funniest scene transpires between Harry and Clive after Harry misinterprets Clive's praise for a bond among men (to the exclusion of women) as an invitation to make a pass.

But *Cloud 9* isn't only about laughs, though there are many; it's about people coming to terms with who they are. Cullum, in a wonderfully sensitive performance, unveils the soul of Betty beneath the drag, a portrait later brought to touching fruition when Puette takes over the role, and the character achieves dignity at last. Note: The production is double-cast. —Deborah Klugman

Antaeus Theatre Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood.; through April 24. antaeus.org.