

CALENDAR

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Geoffrey Wade

DUELING BETTYS
Deborah Puette and Bill Brochtrup in "Cloud 9."

THEATER REVIEW

Nimble take on gender politics

'Cloud 9' by Caryl Churchill has potent wit and Casey Stangl's tight, savvy direction.

CHARLES McNULTY
THEATER CRITIC

A sex farce with gender politics on its mind, Caryl Churchill's "Cloud 9" is a feminist classic that still bowls theatergoers over with its breathtaking theatrical daring.

It's a sprawling play that's tonally tricky to work out. Churchill divides the work into two time periods (the first half is set in Victorian Africa, the second in late-1970s London) and prescribes a variety of unorthodox casting maneuvers that go well beyond cross-gender performance.

But the Antaeus Theatre Company, under the direction of Casey Stangl (an experienced hand with Churchill's work), honors both the laughter and the contemplativeness, even if the balance between the two is still being worked out in places.

Churchill once remarked that as the relationships in "Cloud 9" become more painful, the play gets funnier. [See 'Cloud 9,' E4]



Photographs by GEOFFREY WADE

ABIGAIL MARKS, left, Liza de Weerd, Bo Foxworth and Deborah Puette.

Antaeus' 'Cloud 9' balances two eras

['Cloud 9,' from E1] er. That's a sign of a farce evolving into a more character-centered comedy.

This is evident here as the action leaps a hundred years from a British colonial outpost, where a patriarch holds sway and the drums of restive natives can be heard in the distance, to a London park, where characters (in the throes of the sexual revolution) are permitted the freedom to question the assumptions they've inherited

about their lives. If the emotional depth is less apparent as disappointment mars the festivities in the longish first half, the increasingly aggressive antics, the musical interludes and the neo-Wildean wit tickle us into thought.

This isn't a play that Antaeus' practice of "partner casting" is ideally suited for. (Rehearsals are complicated enough with a single set of actors jumping from one role to another.) But the artful physical production provides solid ground for the players.

Stephanie Kerley Schwartz's scenic design creates playful backdrops that helpfully organize the high jinks for a small stage. Leigh Allen's lighting facilitates the rapid shifts in mood, and A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's costumes have fun with the fads from two eras that couldn't be further apart in their gender dress codes.

Bill Brochtrup, part of the Blighters lineup (the ensemble I saw), is outstanding both as Betty, wife of tyrannical, hypocritical, randy Clive (a gamely booming Bo Foxworth), and adult Edward, gay brother of Victoria (a touching Liza de Weerd). To call Brochtrup's Betty a drag performance would be underselling his accomplishment.

His understated theatricality lends poignancy to the ludicrousness of Betty's marital situation. (Submissive as she is, she's desperately in love with David DeSantos' sharply outlined Harry, a homosexual with a taste for the forbidden.) This note of quiet humanity also infuses Brochtrup's portrayal of Edward, making it possible for us to feel sympathetic toward a character who ventures out of an unsatisfying gay relationship into an incestuous ménage à trois. (Churchill can never resist looking under the hood of taboos.)

Abigail Marks, who was so memorable in Antaeus' 2014 production of "Top Girls" (a slightly more manageable Churchill play), has

'Cloud 9'

Where: Antaeus Theatre Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays. (Call for exceptions.) Ends April 24.

Tickets: \$30-\$34

Info: (818) 506-1983,

www.Antaeus.org

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

her hands full in Act 1, switching roles between a lovelorn lesbian governess and an independent firecracker of a neighbor who has orgasms while fending off Clive's advances. She adroitly handles the dizzying demands, but she brings a gritty reality to Lin, a chaotic lesbian who, while looking after her unruly child Cathy (played with boisterous abandon by a mustachioed Foxworth), falls in love with all-grown-up Victoria (who in the first act was played by doll).

Whew! Are you getting all this?

As required by the text, a white actor (Chad Borden) plays a black servant (Joshua) in a play that throws into relief the role-playing aspect of identity. Borden makes a more vivid impression as Gerry, Edward's proudly promiscuous, noncommittal boyfriend, especially when this rake momentarily stops cruising and goes into full disco mode.

But then "Cloud 9" speaks most profoundly to a modern audience, baffled by too many choices and facing perhaps more formidable internal obstacles than external ones. Churchill's comedy is distinctly of an era, but the keen intelligence and playwriting boldness have preserved the work's freshness for 21st century theatergoers still bouncing between oppression and liberation.

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BILL BROCHTRUP as Betty and Bo Foxworth as Clive in the Antaeus Theatre Company's comedy.