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ON STAGE LOS ANGELES

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SUNDAY, MARCH 13, 2016

ON CLOUD NINE / ANTAEUS

Lilly Wachowski announces her new gender following in the footsteps of her sister, Lana. Casa Valentina arrives in Pasadena. Becoming “one’s self” bubbles into our consciousness now daily. RuPaul’s Drag Race reaches its One Hundredth Episode and he/she is more vocal than ever about expressing yourself. That line from HAIR about the male’s emergence out of his drab camouflage into the birthright of his sex is not exactly spot on, but in Caryl Churchill’s 1979 gender switcheroo **CLOUD NINE**, director Casey Stangl has brought this confusing issue to light and it parades on the Antaeus stage beautifully to comment artistically on gender roles and sex.

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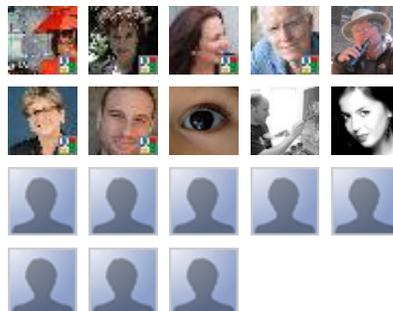
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JD Cullum as Betty and
 Laura Wernette as Ellen
 Photo by Karianne Flaathen

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SHEEHAN

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It's Africa. The British Empire. 1879. Roles for men and women are clearly defined as they properly should be as we meet Clive (Adam J. Smith) who has married his docile helpmate Betty (J.D. Cullum) who knows her place. The black family retainer Joshua (the very white actor Chad Borden) declares that the native Africans are not 'his people.' Gender roles and sexual orientation ebb and flow as the story of infidelity and who's doing what with whom and how unfolds.

One gorgeous performance is the double duty done in the first act by Laura Wernette as the nanny Ellen, who really doesn't like children but does very much like Betty. She also comes and goes as the sensuous and saucy Mrs. Saunders, deftly switching back and forth so fluidly, you'd swear there were two different actors playing the roles. A. Jeffery Schoenberg's costumes are authentic and how Wernette manages the changes off

stage must be a show in itself.

For a play written in 1979, the discussion of gender roles these thirty-seven years later ring true, especially in the Second Act where all bets are off and the cast of the 1879 first act return as different versions of the First Act cast of characters who have aged only 25 years. (It all makes sense if you go with the idea.)

Who's hot for whom and how the children have matured is a cauldron of mixed tastes. Adam J. Smith (Clive in Act I) magically transforms into the rhyme reciting ten year old, Cathy, the daughter of Lin, the very butch lesbian (Wernette from Act I), who is hot for Victoria (Joanna Strapp), who, in Act One was played by a doll!

Suffice it to say that the comings and goings of this gender mishmash works. Even though the lessons of making it through life are a bit confusing, Stangl has her actors working well together with not one moment of hesitation.

In Act Two we meet Borden as Gerry, the predatory homosexual hustler who completely disrespects his submissive lover, Edward, Cullum, as the now middle aged man who truly wants to be a woman. Cullum's subtle approach to this role is charming.

Cathy (Smith) stirs up the stew as the now familiar cast from Act One and in London, 1979, the dance escalates.

In Act One as the *young* Edward, Gigi Bermingham, struggled with 'his' sexuality. In Act Two, Bermingham becomes Betty, the sophisticated and beautiful mum. David DeSantos as the explorer, Harry, in Act One, whom we learn has an eye for little Edward, has become Martin, the husband of Victoria. He is an unabashed roué. Divorcing from Victoria, Martin is free to wander as she wanders into the arms of Lin. It's really not all THAT complicated, but like a familiar melody with catchy lyrics that may be nonsense but still appealing, we wind our way to some interesting conclusions.

This cast, *The Hotheads*, alternates with *The Blighters*... I look forward to seeing the other cast! A worthwhile challenge! Excellent work.

CLOUD NINE

By Caryl Churchill

Directed by Casey Stangl

Antaeus Theatre

5112 Lankershim Boulevard

North Hollywood, CA 91601

Performances continue through April 24:

Thursdays & Fridays @ 8 p.m.,

Saturdays @ 2 p.m. & 8 p.m.,

and Sundays @ 2 p.m.

Click on "Buy Tickets" to view cast schedule.

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