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CLOUD 9

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WOW!

Nearly four decades have passed since *Cloud 9* made its West End debut, but Caryl Churchill's comedic examination of gender and sexuality remains every bit as entertaining, as contemporary, and as downright mind-blowing in 2016 as it was in 1979, particularly as given vibrant new life by The Antaeus Company in a "partner-cast" staging that would give any Broadway revival a run for its money, albeit on a far more intimate (and infinitely more affordable) scale.



Churchill's storytelling concept could hardly be bolder, to take a family of British expats from Victorian-era colonial Africa to 1970s London (while aging them a mere twenty-five years) and, perhaps even audaciously, to cast actors whose gender (and even race) may not at first glance reflect the characters they are playing.

Take Act One's matriarch Betty, played by a man because (as the lady herself puts it) "what men want is what I want to be," or Clive's and Betty's nine-year-old son Edward, brought to precocious life by a female actor to reflect the doll-loving boy's inability to conform either to his societally-assigned gender role or to his budding sexuality, or two-year-old toddler Victoria, embodied by a doll because this is precisely how her family members view her. As for African servant Joshua, if he looks white, it's because "what white men want is what I want to be."



Confined by the strictures of Victorian society, Churchill's 1879 characters find themselves incapable of authentic self-expression, whether it's family friend Harry, whose same-sex desires can only be fulfilled in power-imbalanced assignments with Edward and Joshua, or male chauvinist Clive, himself a victim of 19th-century gender stereotypes, or Betty, who will need to wait a hundred years for her own personal woman's liberation.



Act Two's 1979 pre-AIDS London allows *Cloud 9*'s dramatis personae a freedom their 1879



Since 2007, Steven Stanley's StageSceneLA.com has spotlighted the best in Southern California theater via reviews, interviews, and its annual StageSceneLA Scenies.

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selves could scarcely have imagined, with 30something Edward's same-sex partner Gerry cruising London parks for anonymous hookups, Victoria leaving the constraints of her traditional marriage for a lesbian relationship with single mom Lin, and Betty (now played by a woman) discovering the joys of independence—work, orgasms, and a more open-minded point of view.

Emancipation from societal restraints doesn't necessarily mean lives lived on Cloud 9, however, freedom providing at least as many challenges as it does rewards.

Having already proven themselves Caryl Churchill whizzes with their 2014 revival of the playwright's similarly challenging *Top Girls*, the Artists of Antaeus prove that lightning can indeed strike twice, and with Casey Stangl directing with the same finesse and flair she showed in *The Curse Of Oedipus*, *The Liar*, and *Peace In Our Time*, *Cloud 9* is in expert hands indeed.

Anyone who's not yet enjoyed the unique treat of seeing two very different ensembles adding their own shadings to characters richly developed during full-cast rehearsals owes it to him or herself to check out both "The Blighters" and "The Hotheads."*



For one thing, there's no such thing as type-casting at Antaeus, when actors as physically distinct as Bill Brochtrup and JD Cullum, Abigail Marks and Laura Wernette, and John Allee and Chad Borden get to share roles. Add to the above the equally brilliant Gigi Bermingham, Bo Foxworth, Liza de Weerd, David DeSantos, Graham Hamilton, Deborah Puette, Adam J. Smith, and Joanna Strapp and you've got fourteen actors, each of whom deserves at least a full sentence of superlatives, with special kudos to those who cross gender lines without ever resorting to caricature.



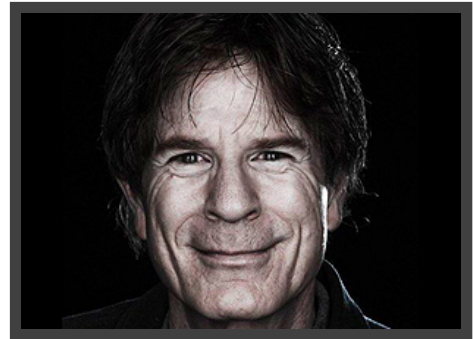
As for *Cloud 9*'s production design, no intimate theater does it better than Antaeus, beginning with scenic designer Stephanie Kerley Schwartz, who cleverly backs Act One's Africa with a giant-sized Union Jack in panels that revolve during intermission to take us to a woodsy 1970s London park. A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's stunning costumes flash back to two very different fashion eras, the design master scoring bonus points for Act One Betty's and Act Two Cathy's man-sized frocks. (Kudos too to cast members making one lickety-split costume change after another.) Leigh Allen lights with exquisite shadings, Jenny Smith Cohn's properties and Jessica Mills' wigs add authenticity and charm, and cast member Foxworth doubles effectively as fight choreographer.

Most memorable of all are the contributions of composer-sound designer-musical director Peter Bayne, who not only provides umpteen requisite effects but sets Churchill's lyrics to tuneful life, coaxing credible vocals from a cast not necessarily versed in musical theater, with special snaps to the disco-licious title song that may have you wanting to get up and boogie along with the singing-dancing cast.



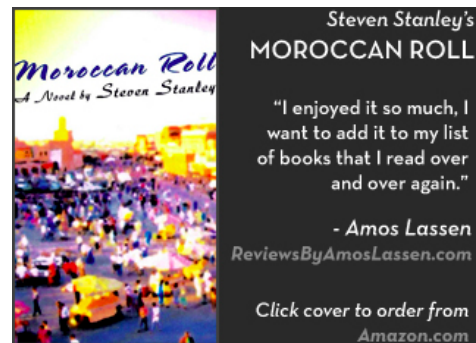
Rachel Berney Needleman is assistant director-dramaturg. Kristin Weber is production stage manager and wardrobe mistress and Sara Haddadin is assistant stage manager.

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As editor of StageSceneLA.com, Steven Stanley is one of Los Angeles' most prolific theater reviewers. He is also the author of *Moroccan Roll*, and an ESL instructor in the English Language Program at California State University, Los Angeles since 1979. [\(read more\)](#)

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Additional program credits go to Adam Meyer (production manager, master electrician), Tyler Seiple (dialect coach), Foxworth and Smith (fight captains), Cullum (dialect captain), Allee and Borden (music captains), and Rene Parras Jr. (assistant technical director).

Expect to be thinking and talking about Cloud 9 long after its transcendent, act-uniting final tableau. Expect to be telling everyone you meet that they owe it to themselves not to miss this show. And if you see Cloud 9 once, expect to be wanting to see it again with an entirely different cast. After all (to paraphrase HBO), it's not theater. It's Antaeus.

*Thursday and Friday night performances feature "The Spacemen," assorted mixes of Blighters and Hotheads.



The Antaeus Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Through April 24.
Thursdays and Fridays at 8:00. Saturdays at 2:00 and 8:00. Sundays at 2:00. All roles are double cast. See website for casts and schedules. Reservations: 818 506-1983
www.Antaeus.org

—Steven Stanley

March 10 and 11, 2016

Photos: Geoffrey Wade (The Blighters), Karianne Flaathen (The Hotheads)

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