

November 4-10, 2010

GO THE AUTUMN GARDEN Lillian Hellman was in her mid-40s when she wrote this astute comedy about the pitfalls and perils of middle age and the accompanying sense of loss that filters through our lives. A kind of Chekhovian group portrait, it takes place in 1949 in a genteel boarding house on the Gulf of Mexico coast. The establishment caters exclusively to the longtime friends of its sweet-natured spinsterish proprietress, Constance (Lily Knight), still pining for beau Nick (Stephen Caffrey), who left her high and dry for his still current wife, Nina (Jane Kaczmarek), 20 years ago. Nick is now an artist of some renown, and his return for a brief visit stirs excitement, especially for Constance's friend Rose (Faye Grant), a simpering Southern coquette whose marriage is on the rocks. The play's secondary motif -- the masquerade of ignorance surrounding homosexuality in the mid-20th-century South -- emerges in the engagement between Constance's French niece, Sophie (Zoe Perry), and Frederick (Joe Delafield), the son of Constance's prim and proper friend Mary (Jeanie Hackett). Directed by Larry Biederman, the production begins somewhat stiffly before gathering steam as the multiple plotlines unwind, then coalesce, and the intimacies -- especially between the married couples -- are finessed. As Constance, Knight's touching vulnerability draws you in. Perry is excellent as the shrewd, long-suffering Sophie; so is Anne Gee Byrd as Mary's mother, a deliciously sardonic grand dame who minces no words. As the story's villainous roué, Caffrey's skill is unimpeachable, but his drunken predator is so unappealing that it's hard to see how he might ever have charmed anyone. (The production is double-cast.) Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theater, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m., Sun. 2:30 & 7:30 p.m.; thru Dec. 19. (818) 506-1983. antaeus.org (Deborah Klugman)