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Hedda Gabler and 42nd Street

By Myron Meisel

You Can't Ever Get What You Want



Jaimi Paige, Ann Noble, and Adrian LaTouelle
(Photo by Karianne Flaathen)

Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* remains a titanic creation that still demarcates the theater's passage into modernity. Its protagonist is the embodiment of contradiction, from the diamond-like clarity of her individuality to her ultimately inscrutable motives. Does she represent the rudiments of an emerging feminist consciousness? (She's blazingly complex and refuses to conform to prescribed gender roles.) Or does she represent a twisted male perception of the confounding power of female assertion? All and none of the above, and everything in between. Hedda is dangerous not so much for what she represents, but for how amenable her character is to our own projections of her, projections consisting of our apprehensions of her. Hedda may reveal more of each audience member's unacknowledged fears and anxieties than perhaps her own quite furious frustration and cruelty.

So there can be no such thing as a definitive Hedda any more than a conclusive Hamlet. Antaeus Company's farewell production in their longtime former Deaf West space on Lankershim (they move next year to newly constructed digs in Glendale). This adaptation by by Australian Andrew Upton captures the company carefully crafted aesthetic at its best, though perhaps with less than the occasional daring that it can bring to challenging contemporary pieces (such as its recent, exquisite *Cloud 9*).

Immediately one of the plum roles in the theater for star female actors, the play was Ibsen's most frequently mounted in the first quarter of the 20th century, with a dozen Broadway productions, surpassing even *A Doll's House*. Yet far more than just a good part, it's impressive how many prominent actresses, from Alla Nazimova to Blanche Yurka to Eva LeGalliene, also seized the opportunity to smash glass ceilings by producing and directing the play as well.

Nevertheless, there are two striking new ideas in the Antaeus rendition, which are more than sufficient to commend the production to anyone who has perhaps felt already adequately exposed to the work. (Those who saw Glenda Jackson, either live at the Royal Shakespeare Company or in her Oscar-nominated performance on film, may be excused for that impression.)

First, the inevitable star casting has nearly always essentially miscast Hedda as far older than she

actually must be. True, it takes formidable chops to seize the dimensions of the character, yet Hedda is a seriously desirable match in an age of early matrimony, of good family if insecure fortune. (Ibsen used her maiden name in the title because he wanted her to be regarded more as her father's daughter than her husband's wife.)

Antaeus stages all of its productions with two casts: I caught "The Governors" with Jaimi Paige as Hedda. (Nike Doukas, a splendid talent, presumably must be quite different.) Paige, who did *Venus in Fur* at South Coast Rep and Philip Ridley's challenging two-hander *Tender Napalm* in a downtown warehouse space, credibly can suggest a young-enough woman who lacks the stature of life experience, though she has attained masteries of willfulness and skillful guile. Hers is an aptly callow Hedda, more immature than imposing, recognizably an antecedent of the contemporary "Mean Girl." She's conscious of her sexual power as the only force she can bring to bear to assert her will and autonomy within her constricted traditional role. Malice becomes her sole recourse for self-expression within the prospectively unending boredom of her unfulfilling marriage.

It's a less innately tragic conception of the character than possible, and it renders her far more accessible, less mysteriously confounding, though no less appalling. It also makes the lecherous advances of Judge Brack, in so many ways a prospective soul mate in manipulative deceit and selfish foul play, creepier than it was, say, between Ingrid Bergman and Ralph Richardson, the villainy particularly vivid in Tony Amendola's witty inflections and considerable erotic force.

The other idea, one that confers some intriguing balance and unity to the underlying themes, is articulated by director Steven Robman in his program note: that every character in the play is condemned to desire desperately something that they will never have. Robman brands this as a privileged sense of entitlement, something that Ibsen may have intuitively understood, but probably couldn't perceive as we do in our current political environment. Nevertheless, the insight creates a context in which Hedda may be extreme, but less aberrant, so the play transposes more into a key of shared existential regret than one of a primitive psychological case study.

Upton's adaptation has the forthright advantages of moving briskly in reasonably vernacular English, although it is tough to blunt the bald exposition to which Ibsen, for all his unalloyed brilliance as a dramatist and thinker, resorts amply.

Getting to Be a Habit With Me



Photo by Joan Marcus

Okay, I'm late to the party. Despite over four thousand performances on Broadway in two incarnations, *42nd Street* (*The Song and Dance Fable of Broadway*) returned to the Pantages for the second time in less than a year, and I finally decided I owed myself to check it out. The gentleman was a dope, because even in this somewhat scraggy touring incarnation, this is a helluva show, generous with its pleasures and reveling in terrific songs and dances. (One wonders how the new Al Dubin show around the corner at the Montalban can possibly compete with this well-worn juggernaut.)

Of course, the original film of *42nd Street* (1933) knew it was trafficking in a hoary plot at the time, and director Archie Mayo, while essentially bereft of visual flair, embraced its *clichés* with gusto. It resuscitated the musical movie after it had fallen out of fashion from the early days of sound, heralding the arrival of dance director Busby Berkeley at Warner Brothers. The studio had pioneered the genre with its Al Jolson vehicles, but *42nd Street* boasted the patented studio moxie of its comedies and dramas, while Berkeley's rigorous madness catapulted the form into a newly cinematic genre, utterly distinct from the genius of Ernst Lubitsch's elegant masterpieces at Paramount with Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette Macdonald.

Still, despite its smash success, there were a bare six Harry Warren-Al Dubin songs in the movie (only half of them doozies), so David Merrick and Gower Champion, working with book writers Michael Stewart & Mark Bramble (the latter, the sole living creator, directing here), plundered the pair's entire Warner-Chappel inventory, interpolating numbers from (by my count) at least seven other Berkeley vehicles at the studio. It's an indubitable hit parade, and the case can be made that Warren and Dubin had a higher slugging percentage of boffo tunes in the 30s than even Berlin, Gershwin or Porter. (Writing for films instead of Broadway did help their stats.)

This creates a few oddities of deployment: since the eponymous *42nd Street* number, with its downbeat tone, must take pride of place, "Lullaby of Broadway" (the second song to win an Oscar, from Berkeley's debut as film director, *Golddiggers of 1935*) gets appropriated as an upbeat paean to the Great White Way, despite lyrics intended as the most frank musical suicide note since Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*. (Memories of Wini Shaw jumping to her death at the climax befog the sanguine sentiments.)

Still, as a pastiche of swell Tin Pan Alley immortal chestnuts, *42nd Street* has been shrewdly assembled, and in lieu of daft camera angles and crane gymnastics, it offers up a cornucopia of tap, a virtual encyclopedia of classic steps. This show belongs to the chorus line, not the characters, populating the stage with legs like we just don't see much anymore (except, of course, on the streets). The familiarity of everything never detracts from the unalloyed pleasure of pros at work, although it remains ever evident for all the talent and sweat on display that this is something other than an Equity cast. In some ways, the earnest industriousness on display makes the joy more palpably direct, not unlike the superior entertainment value of collegiate sports over pro ball.

Of course, one of the ironies of *42nd Street* remains that Peggy Sawyer, the greenhorn from the sticks of Allentown, PA, gets plucked from the chorus to save the show by going out there and coming back a star, even though it seems that every female member of the troupe has superior skills. (Even in the movie, the debuting Ruby Keeler, not coincidentally Al Jolson's wife, acquired the affectionate sobriquet of "Leadfoot," and left stardom after their divorce.) Shrewdly, the production holds back on Caitlin Ehlinger's best talents until the climax, so the illusion of her ascendancy pays off.

As superstar producer Julian Marsh, down on his luck in the Depression, Matthew J. Taylor may lack gravitas, but he boasts a superlatively characterized haircut with flair and conviction to match. Kaitlin Lawrence's diva Dorothy Brock showcases terrific pipes, though, as usual, despite the extensive features of the principal chorines, I could have happily done with more of them.

Like musicals were intended, I sang the songs and mimed the steps down Hollywood Boulevard back to the car and well into the next day. It took utmost restraint to refrain while in my seat.

RECOMMENDED: Hedda Gabler, *Antaeus Theatre Company*, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, (818) 506-1983, www.Antaeus.org, *Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays at 2 p.m., through July 17. Running time: Two hours (with intermission).*

RECOMMENDED: *42nd Street*, *Hollywood Pantages Theatre*, 6233 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood, 800-982-2787, www.HollywoodPantages.com, *Tuesdays through Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 2 p.m. & 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. & 6:30 p.m., through June 19. Running time: Two hours, thirty minutes (with intermission).*



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