

Old Balzac's 'Mercadet' Has Spring in Its Step

Theater Beat

It's no big surprise that Balzac died of caffeine poisoning. Considering that he wrote some 80 novels in 30 years, it may stand to reason he was hyped up on something.

Somehow, in addition to that extraordinary outpouring of prose, Balzac also managed to write a handful of plays, among them, "Mercadet, the Napoleon of Finance."

In Robert Cornthwaite's new translation at the Ivy Substation, Balzac's 150-year-old comedy spans the centuries with sprightliness intact. The Antaeus Company, highly praised for last year's revival—also at the Ivy Substation—of Arthur Miller's "The Man Who Had All the Luck," has had good luck itself digging into the archives for obscure classics.

Granted; the play is an escapist trifle that is unlikely to rattle any belief systems or rearrange any moral priorities. Somewhat predictable in plot, it is designed strictly to entertain, and director Dakin Matthews takes full advantage of his comic opportunities.

The cast requires a number of mature performers in key roles. Fortunately, Antaeus' rich reservoir of talent includes actors ranging from the youthfully ebullient to the AARP eligible, wily old pros at the top of their game.

Matthews (double-cast in the role with Micheal McShane) proves the williest old pro of the evening as Mercadet, a scheming French financier who hopes to stave off bankruptcy by brokering his last asset—his daughter—on the marriage market. Matthews knows that the best way to finesse a laugh is to throw it away, and thanks to Balzac and the capable Cornthwaite, the wit comes in a steady barrage. Balancing the general insouciance, John Achorn, Martin Ferrero and Ralph Drischell are collectively hooty as Mercadet's creditors, grasping skinflints with their beady eyes on the main chance.



JOHN APICELLA

Ralph Drischell, left, and Dakin Matthews star in the comic "Mercadet."

The production resumes next week; it plays in repertory with "Legal Briefs," four short plays with legal themes, which opens Saturday.

F. KATHLEEN FOLEY

• "Mercadet, the Napoleon of Finance," Ivy Substation, 9070 Venice Blvd., Culver City. June 15, 21, 22 and 28, 8 p.m.; June 16 and 30, 2 and 8 p.m.; June 17 and 24, 2 and 7 p.m.; July 1, 2 p.m. Ends July 1. \$20. (818) 506-8462. Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes.