

Autumn Garden



With Lillian Hellman's *Autumn Garden* the Antaeus Company is just now completing a most accomplished series of plays. Much of the company's success is due to its roster of talented performers— the crème de la crème of Hollywood's working actors — and there is no better demonstration of Antaeus at work than to see alternating casts perform this masterpiece.

The play's Southern Gothic style is a perfect foil for Antaeus' stable of performing artists. In *Autumn Garden* their accents are tinged in the comfortable soft rhythms of the deep south, their relationships maintain a sense of familiarity born of long association and director Larry Biederman's gentle prodding creates a pathway through past relationships to allow each of

the 10 characters in this ensemble piece to reach their own apotheoses.

Although the original production in 1951 sank after two months with barely a ripple, from the distance of 60 years, Hellman's *Autumn Garden* takes its place alongside such plays as Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* in culmination of a search for an illustrated novel form. Despite her protestations that she treated all characters equally, however, Hellman's tale of a gallery of Gulf Coast vacationers takes shape around the subjects of everyone else's attention: through their focus on young Frederick and his hapless engagement to the lonely Sophie, each character demonstrates his or her own crisis.

Antaeus' production might have been simply an interesting revival but for the company's method of double casting. In each group the characters achieve a one-of-a-kind, kaleidoscopic portrait. The "Dreamers" cast, for instance, is filled with spectacular, emotional pyrotechnics, from Shannon Holt as Constance nervously awaiting the arrival of Nicholas (Jeffrey Nordling), her ex-boyfriend, to his larger-than-life arrival with unamused spouse, Nina (Kitty Swink), in tow. The same cast boasts Rhonda Aldrich as Rose, a Williamsesque Southern Belle who doesn't know when to stop flirting. In contrast to the dramas swirling around them Kurtwood Smith as Rose's husband, General Griggs, and Josh Clark as the suffering Edward, effectively shape quiet moments of desperation out in the garden. Under Hellman's eye, young Frederick gets an overpowering family in the persons of his smothering mother, Carrie (Eve Gordon) and wealthy grandmother, Mary (Dawn Didawick), a woman with a velvet-gloved iron fist. No wonder that Sophie (pitch-perfect Jeanne Syquia), rescued from war-torn France, is such a fish out of this backwater.

The "Idealists" cast sports an entirely different set of sharp edges. Their charm resides in a collective feeling of palpable urgency. In this rendition a sense of nihilism as a consequence of World War II is felt more explicitly and Sophie's plight (this time played by Zoe Perry) as a bewildered beneficiary of American largesse takes on a new importance. But it is the desperation in the relationships between Stephen Caffrey as a more ruffled Nicholas, Lily Knight as Constance and Jane Kaczmarek as his wife, Dina, that sets the agenda.

Joe Delafield as Sophie's befuddled fiancé, Jeffrey, settles into his family relationships with unease; Anne Gee Byrd brings a more strident undercurrent to her portrayal of the dowager Mary Ellis that is picked up by Jeanie Hackett as her daughter, Carrie. This time the accumulation of bared emotions does not overpower lovely work from Sandra McClain as the maid, Leona or Reba Waters as the German-language nurse (Susan Boyd Joyce fulfilled the role in the first cast).

Compliments must go to Paul Wagar whose dialect coaching created an air of consistency. The fifties are evoked as much by Tina Haatainen-Jones's gorgeous dressing as Tom Buderwitz' scenic design that gave us a more clean-lined and generic house. Working with lighting designer John Eckert, his scrim-like walls occasioned the signature image and sense of space as one character scampered up two flights of stairs in silhouette.

Each ensemble performance of *Autumn Garden* functions as a prism reverberating Hellman's mien, spreading over the years. As distinct as each one is, it is essential to sample them both.

--Leigh Kennicott