



Culture Monster

All the Arts, All the Time

The Spotlight: Anne Gee Byrd and Dawn Didawick in 'The Autumn Garden'

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"Happiest year of my life was when my husband died. Every month was springtime."

-- Mrs. Ellis, "The Autumn Garden" by Lillian Hellman

Anne Gee Byrd and Dawn Didawick play witty Southern matriarch Mary Ellis in the [Antaeus Company's](#) double-cast revival of Hellman's most Chekhovian play, set in a Gulf Coast summer house in 1949. Culture Monster chatted with them for The Spotlight, a new weekly look at the people who work in L.A. theater.

Question: What's the key to this character?

Byrd: Mrs. Ellis understands that the glass is half-empty, but that's OK. You just put a little ice in it.

Didawick: Mrs. Ellis was born in 1879 and lived through women getting the vote. She grew up in a world where you had to pretend that men run things.

Byrd: That's still the case!

Q: Why was the year her husband died the best year of Mrs. Ellis' life?

Byrd: I was married a long time to a man I loved very much. But in widowhood there are things I have done that I would never have pursued if I hadn't had this time. So I understand Mrs. Ellis' sentiment.

Didawick: In my secret back story, Mr. Ellis had a racing problem. She had to contend with all of that. She can't stand lies, yet she knows how to deflect really well.

Q: Her new-found freedom leads her to give very funny advice about sex and money.

Byrd: That's because she holds the hope that others in the play will find the freedom she wanted for herself.

Q: How do your interpretations differ?

Didawick: Well, Anne Gee is a tall, thin, regal woman, and I'm a Southern dumpling.

Byrd: Dawn is much warmer than I am.

Didawick: That's one of the beauties of double casting. You find out how a play can support such different interpretations.

Q: What drew you to "The Autumn Garden"?

Byrd: The play asks how much illusion is required to get through life -- and at what point do those illusions become toxic.

Q: What have you learned about life over 60?

Byrd: That the party wasn't anywhere else.

Didawick: That will be your epitaph, and now I can't steal it.

-- Charlotte Stoudt

"The Autumn Garden" is at the Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, through Dec. 19.