

## A *CurtainUp* Los Angeles Review *The Autumn Garden*

By [Laura Hitchcock](#)

*And I've never liked liars---least of all, those who lie to themselves. — Crossman*  
*Never mind. Most of us lie to ourselves, darling, most of us. — Constance*

Lillian Hellman's sardonically titled 1949 play was her favorite, eclipsing such better known works as *The Little Foxes* and *The Children's Hour*. But despite some glowing reviews, it didn't find enough favor with the general public and closed after a few months. The first Los Angeles revival in some time comes from the Antaeus Theatre. Double cast like all Antaeus productions, it's an ensemble piece, weaving the stories of the twelve guests at a southern mansion near New Orleans, now a hotel, without the melodrama of Hellman's previous plays.

The two casts, called Dreamers and Idealists, held alternate opening nights last week-end, of which I attended only the Idealists. The tiny Deaf West Theatre was transformed by scenic designer Tom Buderwitz into the parlor and porch of the Tuckerman home. Brocade sofas and chairs are strategically placed beneath carved ceilings. Stained glass windows are indicated. On one side a glass door separates the parlor from a porch with a ballustraded railing. The clever blocking by director Larry Biederman overcomes the narrowness of the small set.



Jane Kaczmarek and  
Stephen Caffrey  
(Photo credit: Ed  
Krieger )

The summer guests we meet: childish giggling Rose (Faye Grant), wife of retired General Benjamin Griggs (James Sutorius); Mrs. Mary Ellis (Anne Gee Byrd), acerbic grandmother of Fred (Joe Delafield) and mother-in-law of tight-lipped Carrie (Jeanie Hackett); Edward (Ned) Crossman, an alcoholic banker (Stoney Westmoreland); Constance Tuckerman, who owns the house, (Lily Knight) and her niece, teen-age Sophie (Zoe Perry), daughter of her late brother whom Constance brought from Europe.

Over the course of three hours, various scenarios unfold. Fred and Sophie, the engaged couple, play out one, with suggestions of homosexuality. A fatal disease, grips the General who's longing for escape, pinned to his banal wife. Ned Crossman represents the emptiest life of all. There are also the late-comers — failed artist Nick Denery (Stephen Caffrey) who's come back to his old home town; his wife Nina (Jane Kaczmarek), a glamorous New York socialite; and Constance who has long harbored the hots for Nick and consents to pose for him again, although he paints a vicious caricature.

The cast is uniformly excellent, from Anne Gee Byrd' who portrays the realistic and demanding matriarch with an underhanded sense of humor to Zoe Perry's highly-strung Sophie for whose superb accent, credit dialect coach Paul Wagar. Faye Grant appalling girlishness strikes the right note as Rose and James Sutorius has an appealing desperate naturalness as the General.

Stephen Caffrey brings a disgusting exuberance to Nick and Jane Kaczmarek as his long-suffering wife accepts with grace his accusation that she has the husband she deserves. Leon is Leona here and played by Sandra McClain with dignity and a dash of asperity. Jeanie Hackett brings a bitter twist to Carrie and, as Constance, Lily Knight has the feverish air of a professional hostess. Her long friendship with Ned never blossoms into love and her love for Nick is exposed as ashes.

So it goes with *The Autumn Garden*, a place where dreams never come true. Except for Sophie, who blackmails Nina out of \$5,000 after a drunken pass by Nick, no one is singing merry songs at the end. Realism, in Hellman's book, is the province of middle age and, though we live in different, not to say interesting, times, there's no room for happiness. In fact, it's a word that's never mentioned. In Constance's elegiac closing line, "Most of us lie to ourselves, darling, most of us."