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The Liar: Theater Review

8:09 PM PDT 10/22/2013 by Myron Meisel

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The Bottom Line

Hilarious “translaption” of a post-Shakespearean French comedy zings with inventive language and maniacal pinpoint timing yet still sounds deeper chords of metaphysical musings.

Venue

The Antaeus Company
at Deaf West Theater,
North Hollywood
(through Dec. 1)

Director

Casey Stangl

Cast Reviewed

Nicholas D’Agosto, Ann
Noble, Kate Maher, Rob
Nagle, Gigi
Birmingham, Peter Van
Norden, Bo Foxworth,
Jeff Thomas Gardner

Double Cast

Graham Hamilton,
Joanna Strap, Jules
Willcox, Brian Slaten,
Karen Malina White,
Robert Pine, Joe
Delafield, Jonathon
Lamer

Writer

David Ives, adapted
from the comedy by
Pierre Corneille

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A post-Shakespearean French comedy comes to North Hollywood.

“The unimagined life is not worth living,” opines the compulsive and unrepentant liar, Dorante (Nicholas D’Agosto), to his confounded new valet Cliton (Rob Nagle), as he first arrives in Paris on the make. The young, charming and fleet-tongued fabricator contrives in the space of little more than a day through artful avoidance of any semblance of the truth to woo two skeptical and sophisticated damsels, Clarice (Kate Maher) and Lucrece (Ann Noble), bamboozle his friend Alcippe (Bo Foxworth), and deter his father Geronte (Peter Van Norden) from arranging a marriage by fibbing he’s already been forced into a union with a pregnant gypsy. He’s invariably convincing at first utterance, although inconveniently unmindful to keep his stories straight, so as he is progressively caught up in his deceptions, only the ensuing complications and misunderstandings provide him cover from exposure.

Pierre Corneille has generally been remembered as a writer of tragedies (*Le Cid*), a contemporary of Moliere and rival to Racine. Yet on the evidence of Tony Kushner’s inspired adaptation of *The Illusion* and now this agile juggling act animated in pentameter by David Ives (*Venus in Furs*, *All in the Timing*, *The New Jerusalem*) of his 1644 *comédie*, he could on a good day give Moliere a close run for his money on his own turf.

Ives has obviously felt very free with his dialogue with ostentatious anachronisms and modern references, the strict meter preserving an authentically classical period rhythm while allowing rhymes witty, clever, outlandish and howlingly, deliciously awful. Thankfully, it's not all in couplets, as characters often felicitously rhyme with one another. It sometimes sounds like Shakespeare and sometimes like rap, yet it all comes together with dizzying harmony.

Even in Shakespeare, the humor can often be more conceptually amusing ("yes, that was funny") than laugh-out-loud riotous, but here the rat-a-tat of rapid-fire quips is nearly continually uproarious as reupholstered for modern ears and sensibilities. Like Shakespeare, the drollery always builds to a higher purpose, reflecting on our elastic apprehensions of truth and its perceptions, and of the ironies of honesty and propriety when our most genuine selves need so keenly to deviate from those artificial social presumptions that nevertheless have their virtues. Ives' verbal pyrotechnics may not allow the play to reach quite the profundity of the classic authors, but he manages to come damn close without interrupting the cascade of merriment. Even when he chooses to employ a dash of sentiment to raise the tone a mite toward some constructive resolution, it's never enough to douse the crackling high spirits.

This may be a surefire script in any hands, but everything in it plays excitingly to the strengths of The Antaeus Company. Director **Casey Stangl** has often shown herself to be capable of burnishing any text to its brightest sheen, and the blocking, business and beats orchestrate this lively score with well-tempered harmonies. Antaeus routinely double casts their productions, with no little mixing and matching as well, so if one observes that every member of the players onstage at the performance reviewed seemed utterly unimprovable, that almost certainly isn't so.

Everyone is so fluently steeped in the style of the piece, so attuned to its classical/contemporary modalities, so capable of executing with impeccable precision and offhand ease every physical and verbal demand, that the audience, despite the rhetorical onslaught, can easily relax into the flow – secure they are in the best of hands. The consistency of craft becomes no less stunning than the dexterous verse. This was my second hearing of the play, having attended an early reading in the space a few years back, and on repetition the witty observations lost none of their bite, the poetic pyrotechnics none of their dazzle, and the contemplations of the human condition none of their pathos. Only now, in a full production, every element comes more gloriously alive.

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Director: Casey Stangl

Cast Reviewed: Nicholas D'Agosto, Ann Noble, Kate Maher, Rob Nagle, Gigi Bermingham, Peter Van Norden, Bo Foxworth, Jeff Thomas Gardner

Double Cast: Graham Hamilton, Joanna Strap, Jules Willcox, Brian Slaten, Karen Malina White, Robert Pine, Joe Delafield, Jonathon Lamer

Writer: David Ives, adapted from the comedy by Pierre Corneille

Scenic Design: Keith Mitchell

Costume Design: Angela Balogh Calin

Lighting Design: Francois-Pierre Couture

Sound Design & Original Compositions: Peter Bayne

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