

Production of Balzac comedy rich with rewards

By Julio Martinez
Correspondent

The name "Balzac" is perhaps best-known to American musical comedy buffs as a recurring joke in Meredith Wilson's "The Music Man." But the prolific man of French letters Honore de Balzac (1799-1850) was one of the 19th century's most esteemed novelists, with

over 80 to his

REVIEW credit.

"Mercadet" is one of only five seldom-produced plays he wrote, but it comes to vivid life in this sumptuous Antaeus Company production. Facilitated by a rousing translation by writer/actor Robert Cornwaite, the finely detailed staging of Dakin Matthews and an outstanding ensemble, the production is a joyous romp

"MERCADET"

Where: Ivy Substation, 9070 Venice Blvd., Culver City.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 7 p.m. Sunday; through July 1. Plays in repertory with "Legal Briefs."

Tickets: \$16 to \$20. Call (818) 506-8462.

Our rating: ★★★1/2

through the high-level fiscal chicanery of France's "Napoleon of Finance."

Set in 1850 Paris, entirely in the drawing room of money speculator Mercadet (Matthews), the action revolves around this financially over-extended but always quick-thinking con artist who is desperately attempting to arrange a profitable marriage for his daughter Julie (Tamara Krinsky) while holding off a

quartet of voracious creditors. Goulard (John Achorn), Pierquin (Martin Ferrero), Pere Violette (Ralph Drischell) and Verdelin (Geoffrey Wade).

Despite the setting and the array of characters coming and going, this is no genteel living room farce. In essence, Balzac has created a one-man comedy act played to the tour de force, commedia dell'arte hilt by Matthews. Everyone else in this colorful menagerie is merely a helpless satellite to irascible Mercadet's constant dealings and double-dealings. One thoroughly enjoyable ploy is Mercadet's constant claim that he is waiting for the arrival of his business partner Godeau, who will one day return from a speculative venture in India with untold riches. Hence, everyone is thrown into a hilarious, surreal parallel to the arrival

expectation of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot."

Flitting deliciously off Matthews' facile tongue are plenty of Balzac witticisms given new life by Cornwaite's thoroughly accessible modern translation. After outwitting his three servants (Sarah Cathcart, Robert Phelps, Laura Wernette) into overlooking their monumentally overdue wages, Mercadet proclaims, "Having servants on your side is like having a favorable press, only cheaper." Commenting on why he knows his creditors would not like to see ill come of him, he remarks that his death might be final, "but an unpaid balance lingers on the books forever."

Though dominated by Matthews' Mercadet, the ensemble hold their own quite nicely. Jonathan Nichols is superb as a dandified con man,

posing as the rich suitor (Count de la Brive, who is almost a match for his prospective father-in-law. He is aided in crime by Nicholas Saunders' oily turn as Mericourt, the marriage arranger who would like nothing better than to help outwit Mercadet.

Krinsky displays wonderful comic timing as Mercadet's perky daughter, who is desperately in love with her father's poor clerk Minard, played to the sincere but callow hilt by Scott Allegrucci. Also acquitting herself well is Mary Kay Wolf as Mercadet's long-suffering but ever-hopeful wife.

Serving Balzac's shenanigans well are the evocative production designs of Terry Evans (set), Peter Strauss (lights), Dean Cameron (costumes) and Anne McNaughton (music).