

ENTERTAINMENT - LIVE STAGE

The Autumn Garden at Antaeus dissects love but brings hope.

by Christina Torres

It's easy to get excited about what is "modern"—modern technology, modern art, modern theatre even. Culturally, the best is what's the most "new" and "original" work out there.



Eve Gordon, Josh Zuckerman and Dawn Didawick

Photo by Ed Krieger

Given this fact, the Antaeus Theatre Company in North Hollywood should not flourish the way that it does. Still, for the past 19 years Antaeus has been able to ensure that "quality classical theater [is kept] vibrantly alive" here in Los Angeles. The company holds wonderfully true to that tradition with its final

production of the season, Lillian Hellman's *The Autumn Garden*.

The Autumn Garden, written and produced by Hellman in 1951, was well reviewed but not publicly loved by its audience at the time. The show is a dark comedy: it looks at the lives of middle-aged Southern families living in a "genteel" and upper-middle-class world of etiquette, brandy on the porch, and small town gossip. The group of friends has spent the past 23 summers at Constance Tuckerman's boarding house, living through the social rituals and routine. Everything changes with the return of the hometown-boy-turned-famous-artist forces everyone to reconsider their past, their futures, and the choices they have made. While the casual observer might see the play as "pessimistic," the play shows what Hellman believed about life and choices that we so often seem to forget: people can not only control the course of their lives, but attain much from them as well.

Antaeus provides a full double cast for every show, in an attempt to ensure that performers stay sharp, and create an environment of collaboration among company members as well. This, combined with sharp music cues and a beautiful and innovative set meant two different powerhouse nights of theatre. While both casts were wonderful, they each offered very different experiences in the small black box theatre.



Kurtwood Smith and Rhonda Aldrich

Photo by Ed Krieger

"The Idealists" live up to their name—the ensemble works phenomenally well together and while the show's humor does not play as obviously as its partnered cast, the show has a much more serious and pensive tone to its story. In truth, every member of the cast deserves accolades for their performance.

Rose, portrayed by Faye Grant, is comedically vain and heartbreakingly confused.



Lily Knight and Stoney Westmoreland

Photo by Ed Krieger

Knight as Constance offered a tragic sadness to her humor as the frazzled house owner reuniting with her former beau, and Constance always felt grounded in the real emotions of their story. Jane Kaczmarek was equally adept in her role, being a quiet ferocity to Nina's fish-out-of-water experience as she watches her husband drift away. Both women were not

only wonderful foils to each other, but also made clear that there were shared tragedies in loving an unworthy man.

Stephen Caffrey's Nick had the outrageousness and frustrating charm needed to both love and hate him, and both Stoney Westmoreland and James Sutorious both gave wonderfully rich and complex performances as Ned and General Griggs. The real standout, though, was Zoe Perry's portrayal of Sophie. Stoic, complex, and delightfully nuanced, trying to get into Sophie's head was a consistent joy throughout the play, and her journey became the emotional heart of the story.

"The Dreamers" offer perhaps a less meditative experience, but the show's dark, jabbing humor and wordplay was incredibly evident. The cast was consistently laughing during the first act, brought about by the casts willingness to have fun and enjoy the zany misgivings of the world they were in. The cast had equal chemistry that made the second experience just as enjoyable.

Kurtwood Smith was both delightfully gruff and desolate as he struggled to find his place as General Griggs., and Josh Clark's Ned had a musicality and wisdom that really changed the perspective of the character. Jeffrey Nordling offered a very different take on Nick Denery—the virility and machismo of the character's motivation underlay every action and was wonderful to watch.



Jane Kaczmarek and Stephen Caffrey

Photo by Ed Krieger

Kitty Swink's Nina was more emotional, but her jabs at Nick made their relationship so clear and concise that the dynamic and chemistry between the characters was completely palpable. Shannon Holt's portrayal of Constance was much more physical—adding a sense of slapstick that may have made her story less serious, but also the character more amusing (especially her wonderful starts and stutters at the show's open).. In addition, the chemistry between Dawn Didawick, Eve Gordon and Josh Zuckerman as the Ellis family provided an interesting side plot as the family navigated the waters of upper-class society, as well as their changing place in it.

Overall, I can't recommend this show (or Antaeus) in general enough. Both casts are worth watching, and despite a long running time (3 hours), I was kept engaged and involved the entire time. Despite the world's focus on looking towards the future, Antaeus and this production of *The Autumn Garden* forces us to turn around and look at our past; not only for the lessons it holds, but for the beautiful journeys of a time and society somewhat forgotten that occurred.

The Autumn Garden runs through December 19th, with shows 8p shows Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, and Sundays at 2:30p and 7:30p. Tickets, as well as Cast Performance Schedules are available at <http://www.Antaeus.org> or (818) 506-1983. Tickets range from \$30-34 dollars, and running time is about 3 hours.

The Antaeus Company is located at the Deaf West Theatre, at 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, CA, 91601