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Theatre Review (LA): *The Autumn Garden* by Lillian Hellman

By Robert Machray

The Antaeus Company (full disclosure: I am a member) has had a remarkable first season. The company started 14 years ago under the direction of that most wonderful of actors, Dakin Mathews, and had as its home the Mark Taper Forum. They have come a long way since then and have just completed their first season of plays which included *Cousin Bette* (a theatrical version of Balzac's novel by Jeffrey Hatcher), *King Lear*, and now Lillian Hellman's *Autumn Garden*. Over the years they have produced several single plays, including *Mother Courage*, *Pera Palas* (a Turkish play in association with Boston Court), Chekov's *The Wood Demon* (at the Taper), a couple of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, an original musical, and the yearly Classics Fest which becomes the birthplace of plays that may or may not be produced.

The Autumn Garden came out of Classics Fest, and like *Cousin Bette* and *King Lear*, is bound to prove a success. Everything about the production is stunning, including the gorgeous set by Tom Buderwitz, the lovely costumes by Tina Haatainen-Jones, the lighting by John Eckert, the sound design by John Zalewski, and the extraordinary casts (Antaeus utilizes two complete companies in order to accommodate the fact that their members are often getting work in television, Broadway, and movies), as well as the marvelous direction by Larry Biederman, who allows each cast the freedom to create its own particular production, both valid but both very different.

Lillian Hellman, writer of such classics as *The Children's Hour* and *The Little Foxes*, called *The Autumn Garden* her "most satisfying play—certainly it was in the writing." Gone is the melodrama of her earlier works, and there are no central characters because it is a true ensemble play about ten people who interact and intersect in the autumn of their lives in a Southern mansion 100 miles from New Orleans in the year 1949. The play is very Chekhovian with a little Williams and O'Neill thrown in for good measure. The characters are at rest, often leading lives of desperation, denial, or complacency, until an old friend of the family, a womanizer, Nicholas Denery, descends on the house. His ways are gallant, brusque, and even sexy, but he is poison to the inhabitants of this house.

The characterization of this womanizer makes the two casts so different. When played by Stephen Caffrey, Nick is a roué gone to seed. He is chubby, obnoxious, aggressive, and desperate for approval (he gets none from his wife, who knows his games by heart). Jeff Nordling's Nick is sexy, attractive, dangerous, and to me more like one of Williams' attractive but dangerous men. Nordling's Nick is hard to resist while Caffrey's is hard to escape.

Much of *The Autumn Garden* seems autobiographical, mirroring Hellman's troubled relationship with Dasheill Hammett. There is also a suggestion that a gay character (Tennessee Williams perhaps) is lurking around seducing the young man in the play (Josh Zuckerman and Joe Delafield). Each production is further delineated by tone; the one cast has people who are walking dead, while the other must learn to face the bitter truth as the play progresses.

The one cast (designated the "Dreamers") is made up of Rhonda Aldrich, Dawn Didawick, Kurtwood Smith, Josh Zuckerman, Eve Gordon, Jeanne Syquia, Sandra McClain, Jeffrey Nordling, Kitty Swink, and Susan Boyd Joyce. The other cast ("Idealists") is made up of Faye Grant, Anne Gee Byrd, James Surtorius, Stoney Westmoreland, Jeanie Hackett, Zoe Perry, Sandra McClain (again), Stephen Caffrey, Jane Kaczmarek, and Reba Waters. I really enjoyed seeing both casts, not only because this company has so many talented members but also

because the process, the double casting, heightened my enjoyment of the play. *The Autumn Garden* will play at [The Deaf West Theatre](#) until Dec. 19th.