



TWO DREAM TEAM CASTS IN "THE AUTUMN GARDEN" - IMMENSELY SATISFYING @ DEAF WEST THEATRE
By M.R. Hunter
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Shannon Holt and Jeffrey Nordling Photo by Ed Krieger

In a city obsessed with youth, where growing old gracefully is more a vice than a virtue, The Antaeus Company's double-cast revival of Lillian Hellman's frank, Chekhovian masterpiece concerning the immutability of middle-age is a sensational tour de force

championed by both veteran casts. Considered by Ms. Hellman as her "most satisfying play," these productions are just that, immensely satisfying—one feels a sort of languor afterwards, much like the languid desperation of Hellman's characters fending off the autumn of their days.

This rarely produced play, (partly due to its cast size and three-hour length), receives a handsome turn by a mature ensemble under Larry Biederman's keen direction. Kurtwood Smith and Jane Kaczmarek add star power (each playing in different casts) to an already illustrious company of players in Antaeus' "Idealists" and "Dreamers" offerings. Both performances are equally excellent—there is no one better than the other here, which goes to the incredible talent and subtle nuances each actor brings to their roles.



Jeffrey Nordling and Jeanne Syquia Photo by Ed Krieger

This quiet, character-driven work set in a distinguished summer home near the Gulf is a departure from Hellman's melodramatic plots. Full of philosophical observations about the ironies of life and love, her characters are wise beyond their "fritted away" years, but this wisdom comes too late for them. The only one

who seems to have any realistic expectations is Sophie—an awkward 18-year-old foreigner whose self-deprecating humility is a foil for her shrewder instincts. For the younger generation, love is a luxury, an ideal without substance, unlike the older generation who pinned their hopes and aspirations on their passions only to meet with bitter disappointment and refusal.

Delusions are shattered when a local artist, Nicholas Denery returns for an unexpected visit with his New Yorker socialite wife, Nina, much to the nervous anticipation of his former flame, Constance Tuckerman. Having spent the last twenty years harboring unrequited feelings for him, she is unable to recognize the faithful affection of her childhood friend Edward Crossman. Nicholas turns the house upside-down with his raucous behavior, boozing and flirting while boorishly meddling in the lives of his housemates. Injecting himself in the private affairs of others, Nicholas treats it all as sport, leaving Nina to clean up the chaos left in his wake.

Caught in the maelstrom of Nicholas' visit are the Griggs—an unhappily married General seeking a divorce from his immature and ridiculous nouveau riche wife, Rose and the distinguished Ellis grand dame, Mary



Kurtwood Smith and Rhonda Aldrich Photo by Ed Krieger

and her daughter Carrie, a clingy overbearing mother to her hapless son Frederick whose devotion to a man is tinged with homosexual undertones. Sophie, engaged to Frederick, does the "best she can" but is homesick for her mother half a world away. As Nicholas needles Edward and Constance,

conspires with Rose, and unsuccessfully attempts to charm the Ellis clan, he inadvertently threatens to ruin Sophie's reputation. For all of his oafish machinations, Nicholas frees them from their own deceptions.

Biederman keeps the pace at an enjoyable clip, moving from one scene to the next seamlessly. The staging on Tom Buderwitz's sumptuous box set parlor framed by upper and lower window moldings beside a French Quarter inspired portico flows through the doors and scrims so that no moment is wasted, keeping the audience from squirming in their seats.

The Dreamers cast features Kurtwood Smith, Rhonda Aldrich, Eve Gordon, Dawn Didawick, Josh Zuckerman, Kitty Swink, Jeffrey Nordling, Josh Clark, Reba Waters, Sandra McClain, Jeanne Syquia, and Shannon Holt. The Idealist cast features James Sutorius, Faye Grant, Jeanie Hackett, Anne Gee Byrd, Joe Delafield, Jane Kaczmarek, Stephen Caffrey, Stoney Westmoreland, Reba Waters, Sandra McClain, Zoe Perry and Lily Knight.

Smith's General Griggs is an embittered man of his own circumstance, much more cold and unfeeling to Sutorius' kindlier desperation for freedom. As Rose, Aldrich and Grant are equally silly but their manipulations play well with their respective player husbands as Aldrich comes across much steelier than Grant's pitiful aged beauty.

As the grand dame Mary Ellis, Didawick embodies a brash woman made hard by a hard fate. Byrd rounds off this tough matriarch with sensitive flourishes, but sometimes loses the gut-punching lines with too much tender feeling.

Gordon and Hackett both shine as co-dependent mothers with their son, Frederick, played by Zuckerman and Delafield.

Swink and Kaczmarek create two very dynamic Nina's with Swink's haughtier sophisticate against Kaczmarek's flustered but sweetly enabling sensibilities.

The physically demanding role of Nicholas Denery receives an oily, con-man deviousness by Nordling that makes his bedroom scene with Sophie far more menacing. But Caffrey's hack artist alcoholic is perhaps much more sympathetic and lovable by comparison.

Josh Clark gives Edward Crossman a stiff-lipped but resentful tone, while Westmoreland finds moments of humor and brings out the peacekeeper aspects to the character.

Syquia is a harder Sophie to Perry's compliant teenager, yet Syquia adds some memorable choices, particularly in the bedroom scene with Nicholas that support Sophie's later decision.



Jeanie Hackett, Joe Delafield and Anne Gee Byrd Photo by Ed Krieger

Holt and Knight brilliantly play out the two sides of Constance's nature with total commitment. Holt flutters about like an injured bird; self-conscious and less comfortable in her own skin especially around her one true love Nicholas. Knight's Constance is tired, worn down by her fantasies, which makes her last hopeful chance at a life that much more moving and effective.

Sandra McClain and Reba Waters round off both casts as Leona and Hilda.

Double-cast means double the costumes and Tina Haatainen-Jones designs are outstanding, specifically Rose Griggs and Nina Denery for both shows.

With so many excellent shows to choose from this season, it is difficult for me to urge audiences to see both casts, but to see one without the other is to be poorer for it. The Antaeus Company has done it again, coming off their critically acclaimed "King Lear" they have finished their season with a huge and resounding flourish. It is rare to see a revival of "The Autumn Garden" but even rarer to see two unbelievable casts in these unforgettable performances. Bravo! Bravo!

--M.R.Hunter

"The Autumn Garden"

Runs through Dec 19 Thurs, Fri, & Sat at 8pm Sun at 2:30pm & 7:30pm
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