

CRITIC'S PICK

Tonight at 8:30: If Love Were All

November 07, 2007

By Les Spindle

The surprising thing about this ambitious play anthology is the breadth of playwright-actor-composer Noël Coward's work, encompassing brooding drama, screwball comedy, satire, music-hall interludes, and more. For the first time since 1940, all nine one-acts in this suite are being staged locally, plus one cut prior to the 1936 premiere. Six directors and 43 actors from the Antaeus Classical Theatre Ensemble collaborate. Two bills (*If Love Were All* and *Come the Wild*) of four plays alternate; two additional one-acts will be staged readings in December. Both evenings are double-cast and the combinations of actors vary. Antaeus achieves a masterful remounting -- a logistic and aesthetic marvel -- of a neglected work. It's a joy to see the company's versatile thespians savor multiple delicious roles.

The Star Chamber, directed by William Ludel, is a timelessly resonant satire. In a West End theatre, self-centered actors on a committee overseeing an actors' retirement home convene. Alas, frivolous side conversations prevail over lip-service philanthropy. Presiding is haughty board president Xenia (Christina Pickles, splendid in this scenery-chewing role -- Auntie Mame and Vera Charles rolled into one). Maurice, a longhaired bohemian artiste, is played with droll dexterity by JD Cullum and Ray Porter.

Two plays deal with marital infidelity. *We Were Dancing*, directed by Michael Murray, is a fanciful comedy about an extramarital attraction at a country club, where Louise (Emily Chase, Nike Doukas) and Karl (Cullum, Bill Brochtrup) consider committing adultery, while Louise's civilized husband (Josh Clark) objects. The actors mine the wry material for maximum wit. In the much darker *The Astonished Heart*, directed by Stephanie Shroyer, Leonara (Faye Grant, Kirsten Potter) sets her sights on the psychiatrist husband (Michael Reilly Burke, Bernard White) of her former school chum Barbara (Jeanie Hackett, Shannon Holt) but changes her mind after winning him. Hackett and Grant offer powerfully subtle interplay in depicting the women's complex friendship, while Potter and Holt give a viable interpretation showing more surface animosity. Burke's moving portrayal of the doctor needing healing is superior, though White's interpretation is also compelling.

Hands Across the Sea, directed by Murray, is a zany mistaken-identity farce. Madcap socialite Piggie (Doukas) entertains eccentric guests between nonstop phone calls. Doukas' inspired comic turn is a standout. Running a close second are Anne Gee Byrd (alternating with Melinda Peterson) and Phil Proctor as two utterly confused guests. Proving there are no small parts for resourceful actors, Ryan Spahn relishes his role as an ignored delivery boy by slipping cocktails and sitting in a corner with a glassy-eyed grin, while alternate player Nathan Patrick finds equal hilarity in the poor lad's utter perplexity.

Presented by the Antaeus Classical Theatre Ensemble at the Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood.

Repertory schedule. Oct. 27-Dec. 23.

(866) 811-4111. www.antaeus.org.