

DAILY VARIETY

Cousin Bette

By PHIL GALLO

February 8, 2010

(Deaf West Theatre, North Hollywood; 65 seats; \$30, \$34)

Jeffrey Hatcher, whose adaptations include "Tuesdays with Morrie" and "The Turn of the Screw," has a field day with humor, sex and deceit in penning a version of Balzac's Machiavellian tale in a contemporary voice. The setting remains 1830s Paris, but once Bette breaks the fourth wall in the opening scene, it's obvious the dialogue and the characters feel few ties to historical accuracy. The commanding, measured performance from Nike Doukas as Bette is the main attraction; the others are there to fall into her wicked maze of deceit and revenge.



Hatcher's "Cousin Bette," with an ensemble of 16, relies on the power of one, specifically the ability of the actress in the lead role to pull in the audience by building empathy for her station in life. Once she has the dominoes set, it's crucial that no twinge of remorse come over the audience as they tumble. Doukas delivers on the way up and down in this journey from meek wallflower to vindictive puppet master.

Bette is the one truly fleshed-out character of the lot and Doukas communicates her transformation through posture, demeanor and even her saucer-shaped eyes, which shift from pools of pain to a tyrannical gaze. Nothing is out of place in her performance.

Bette (double casting alternates Doukas with Alicia Wollerton) sets the scene: She is the "poor relation," a spinster who lives alone in a sparse fifth-floor walk-up, overlooked by wealthy relatives who see her as a confidant yet not an equal in social circles. Her bloodline insufficient to connect her with wealth, she creates a scheme that not only pours francs into her pockets but delivers her a storybook romance with Polish sculptor Wenceslas Steinbock (Daniel Bess), whom she saved from a suicide attempt.

Here the layers begin. The mistresses, the abused woman next door, her chummy cousins and uncles and their social circles confide in her with uncommon brazenness. Loaded with information from who stole whose concubine to art commissions to government kickbacks from grain sales, Bette sets out to destroy the family. She vows "our hearts have been pecked and ravaged by these people. We shall make them pay."

And she does. With morality seemingly in short supply, Bette enlists her neighbor Valerie Marneffe (Jen Dede) to take on a sex scheme in a devilish Lucy-and-Ethel spree, while she uses misdirection, confused identities and good old-fashioned duplicity to set up her own empire. It works remarkably well.

Then a wrench gets thrown in. An old love of Valerie's, Demontes (Mirron Willis), has returned to Paris, lurking mysteriously in the neighborhoods the Hulots frequent. Arriving as late in the play as he does - and with such an unlikely story - his presence jars the play before his actions do. Once his plot for redemption collides with that of Bette, there are still chapters of information to disseminate that is handled in a lengthy coda that requires a scorecard to keep it straight. The play's final note is oddly humorous.

Stand-outs in the cast include Robert Pine as the purse-string controller Marshal Hulot, Tony Amendola as the conniving perfume mogul M. Crevel and Dede's Valerie Marneffe, who beds numerous suitors and remains doe-eyed in her hope for a brighter future.

Director Jeanie Hackett briskly moves the action and the three hours have no lulls. She deftly ensures that Bette is at the center of this universe despite nearly every other male believing they are the ones in control. A staggering number of scene changes means the moving of furniture and props has a choreography all its own that goes off without a hitch.

Sets, Tom Buderwitz; costumes, A. Jeffrey Schoenberg; lights, Leigh Allen; sound, Cricket S. Myers; wigs, Sarah Hatten; production stage manager, Leia S. Crawford. Opened, reviewed Feb. 6, 2010 through Mar. 21. Running time: 3 HR.