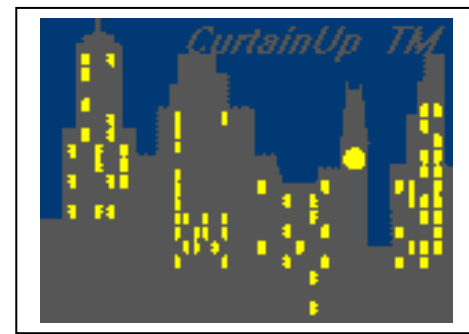


# *Cousin Bette*

By Laura Hitchcock  
February 6, 2010



*I am not spendthrift with my passions, Valerie, hatred is far too dear a fuel. -Bette*



Nike Doukas  
(Photo: Michele K. Short)

Of all the passions, obsession is the most powerful and Honoré de Balzac's novel *Cousin Bette*, published in 1846, takes this theme and runs with it. Under the precise and brilliant direction of Jeanie Hackett, the Antaeus Company has taken on Jeffrey Hatcher's astute adaptation in a World Premiere.

Nike Doukas shrouds natural beauty in an austere countenance that breaks into demonic laughter as Bette, the middle-aged old maid poor relation of the wealthy Hulot family. Life has always been grim until she stumbles upon Count Wenceslas Steinbock (Daniel Bess), literally at death's door. He's attempted suicide by gassing himself in the attic apartment above hers.

Bette saves him and his new lease on life is hers as well, that is, until the engagement of the count to her young cousin Hortense (Kellie Matteson). Then it turns to hate and she sets forth on a wily course to destroy her entire family: Hector Hulot, played with vivid attention to all his foppish ways by John Prosky; his pretty but inane wife Adeline (Emily Chase); Hortense; the honorable if stuffy Marshal, Hector's older brother (Robert Pine); son Victor, a nonentity (Bill Brochtrup); his silly wife Celestine (Alexandra Goodman), daughter of M. Crevel (Tony Amendola), a filthy rich and odiferous businessman; and Old Fischer (Paul Willson), a foolish old grain-dealer.

The huge cast, which includes servants, doctors, etcetera, dance to Bette's tune as she manipulates them all. Balzac's satiric human comedy (which today we would call "black") has some devilish twists and turns before its ending which features Bette, as she has always been, center stage. Doukas holds the stage, an always chilling and fascinating presence. Sometimes her voice drops but it picks up again.

Hatcher's adaptation runs three hours with two ten-minute breaks but it would be a shame to cut it to Masterpiece Theatre length. Balzac wrote in detail and this production does him justice. Hatcher's also found the humor, even better than Balzac.

The production whizzes by, with servants in costume moving props on and off. The superbly trained cast never loses their grip on the audience's attention. A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's costumes convey all the richness of the period and Tom Buderwitz's scenic design, down to the comical paintings on the walls, looks appropriately aged. Chopin's delicate piano music provides the leit-motif.

Run, do not walk, to this unique production of a world class play!

Cousin Bette by Jeffrey Hatcher, based on the novel by Honoré de Balzac  
Director: Jeanie Hackett

Running time: Three hours with two 10-minute intermissions

Running dates: Feb. 6-March 21, 2010

Where: Deaf West Theatre. 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Reservations: (818) 506-1983.