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The Liar (Antaeus Theatre)



How do we assess the value of a liar? Why do people lie? When is it appropriate? In any serious drama, you'd want a playwright to examine and, possibly, answer those questions with the deepest of thought.

But when the playwright is Pierre Corneille and his play, *Le Menteur/The Liar* (from 1643), as recently adapted by American playwright David Ives (in 2010), is onstage in a brilliant production by Casey Stangl, at the ever-adventurous Antaeus Theatre, then this combination of factors has created a gloriously funny event.

A young man from the provinces, Dorante, comes to Paris to make his fortune. On his first morning there, he hires a factotum, Cliton, who watches him entrance two young women of Paris by telling tall tales about his work in the border skirmishes against the Germans. He falls in love with Clarice, but mortally confuses her name with that of her best friend, Lucrece. Dorante continues to lie and lie and tell more lies, including ones to his father, G ronte, about a wife in the south of France (who doesn't exist) and, eventually, about his child she is carrying (most definitely not the truth). When he lies to his best friend, Alcippe, about his expensive seduction of a beautiful woman named Clarice, on the river Seine, with boats and food/drink and fireworks, he doesn't know that Alcippe is engaged to her, and who the fianc  suspects of sneaking off at night to give him horns, so Dorante is confused when challenged by Alcippe's "second," Philiste, to a duel. The duel, such as it is, takes place in the park, but with mimed swords, and Dorante narrating it as though it was a radio-broadcast of a prize-fight, culminating in the stabbing death of an audience member sitting in the front row (the look on the two actors' faces as they "realize" what they've done is priceless). Eventually, as these things must, all is settled, the gentry and the working class are paired off properly to keep the social order intact, and we leave the theatre limp as noodles.

Obviously it sounds like tripe and hoey, but in the hands of pros such as Stangl and Antaeus' *cr me-de-//cr me* company of actors, and the technical support given by the likes of Keith Mitchell's simple set design of ramps and furniture, using Adam Meyer's period props, dressed in Angela Balogh Calin's semi-period/semi-fantasy costumes, well, it just couldn't go wrong.

And it doesn't. Partner-cast ("double-cast" anywhere else) due to the intense work schedules of so many of their members, into two companies, one may go to both company's opening nights, but after the opening weekend, it's a free-for-all (you have to call ahead to find out the schedule for any particular actor). But you won't go wrong with any night you attend, as well-performed as it is.

Rehearsed together (when possible), the director has a single show on command, with well-rehearsed actors to amuse and amaze you.

Ives has done the seemingly impossible: translated and adapted (what he calls "translaptation") Corneille from the original 17th Century French into 21st Century English in pentameter scansion. It rhymes and does so wittily. It's truly an extraordinary deed, this original Comedy of Manners, after Corneille. Makes you want to read or see all of Ives' translaptations, they're that good.

Since both casts are well-matched, it's next to impossible to do individual justice to their work. Let me stress how impressed I was (and have been for a long time) by superb vocal work of the actors. As well as the physical control they exhibit, both young and old(er). The Dorante of both Nicholas D'Agosto and Graham Hamilton was equal in youthful and energetic flair; the confusions of the incredulous Clitons (Rob Nagle and Brian Staten); the wide-mouthed vocalization of Jules Willcox (Kate Maher was missing both nights) as Clarice; the quiet red-headed sexiness of Ann Noble and Joanna Strapp; the twin servants to the two women, stern Isabelle and dominatrix Sabine (Gigi Bermingham and Karen Malina White); the over-bearing and naive father, Géronte (Robert Pine and Peter Van Norden), with his tricky rose-colored sunglasses; the over-the-top jealousy of punk'd-out Alcippe (Joe Delafield and Bo Foxworth) and the officious meekness of the Philiste (Jeff Thomas Gardner on the two nights I attended).

That it works so extraordinarily well is due mainly to the director. Stangl has staged it so well that all the actors fall into their places with ease. Upstairs, downstairs, in my lady's chamber, etc. And the cast has accomplished bravura heights, with audiences loudly applauding favorite monologues and that astonishing sword-fight. No praise is too high for this company in its distinctive accomplishment. All the actors must be applauded until your hands sting – well-earned and gorgeously presented. I say Bravo to All!

The Liar is performed Thursdays through Sundays until December 1st, 2013, at the Deaf West/Antaeus Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd, North Hollywood, CA 91601. Tickets: 818.506.1983 or at www.Antaeus.org.

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