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CRITIC'S CHOICE

'Cousin Bette' has that PBS Feel

By David Nichols
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In "Cousin Bette," adapter Jeffrey Hatcher assumes the daunting challenge of giving novelist Honoré de Balzac's dense voice a dramatic vocabulary. He succeeds to a remarkable degree, as does this handsome Antaeus Company staging of Balzac's dark-toned 1846 novel of cultural revenge.

Peasant-born Bette Fischer (Alicia Wollerton, alternating with Nike Doukas) occupies the opposite end of the Parisian strata from cousin Adeline Hulot (Laura Wernette), whose devotion to straying husband Hector (Barry Creyton) and rejection of oily in-law Crevel (Micheal McShane) is only one of Balzac's ironies. Although Bette accepts the clan's crumbs, profound resentment roils beneath her calm surface.



It boils over after Bette saves a suicidal, artistic Polish aristocrat (Henri Lubatti) who lives in her tenement, only to see him become engaged to Hortense Hulot (Kellie Matteson). An ornate scheme to decimate her kin unfolds, aided by abused neighbor Valérie Marneffe (Dana Green).

Given how much detail Balzac packed into this work, Hatcher's telescoping is impressive, deftly using Bette as narrator and daring an even more sardonic resolution. Director Jeannie Hackett fluidly steers the fluctuating morality, corruption and passion around designer Tom Buderwitz's multi-level set. A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's Napoleonic-era costumes, Leigh Allen's subtle lighting and Cricket S. Myers' Chopin-laden sound help sustain an aura of plush perversity.

Antaeus' practice of double casting companies means any given night carries its own spontaneity, courtesy of an accomplished ensemble. Bette requires a virtuoso interpreter; at the reviewed performance, Wollerton delivered the goods, droll, chilling and vital. Past encounters with Doukas promise an equally fascinating take, with the rotating roster including such known quantities as Tony Amendola, Bill Brochtrup, Rebecca Mozo and Robert Pine.

The chief drawbacks are its length and uneven narrative weight. Hatcher's carefully modulated Acts 1 and 2 give way to an Act 3 that is virtually all events and reversals. These reservations needn't stop Balzac devotees or "Masterpiece Theatre" fans from booking tickets immediately.

"**Cousin Bette**," Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 4 p.m. Sundays. Ends March 21. \$30-\$34. (818) 506-1983 or www.antaeus.org. Running time: 3 hours.

Photo: Alicia Wollerton and Dana Green. Photo credit: Michele K. Short