



Rebecca Mozo, Nike Doukas in *Cousin Bette*
Photo by Michele K. Short

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Cousin Bette

By Deborah Klugman
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Drawn from Balzac's *La Comedie Humaine*, playwright Jeffrey Hatcher's adaptation revolves around a cunning woman's campaign to revenge herself on the rich relatives who have callously dismissed her as shabby and unimportant. Sheltered, and fed with scraps of food off her pretty cousin's plate, poor-relation Bette Fischer (Nike Doukas) grows up nurturing her hate, eventually evolving into a plain-faced spinster who is everybody's confidante and nobody's friend. Brilliantly Machiavellian, Bette's fastidious plot to destroy the family involves arranging a liaison between her attractive neighbor and abused wife Valerie (Jen Dede), and Hector (John Prosky) the lecherous and profligate husband of her virtuous cousin, Adeline (Emily Chase). Bette also acquires wealth (and thus power) by promoting the work of a young Polish sculptor, Steinbock (Daniel Bess), whom she's fallen in love with - unfortunately for her, since he ends up betrothed to Adeline's daughter, Hortense (Kellie Matteson). Directed by Jeanie Hackett, the production purposefully underscores the source material's melodramatic elements; for example, heightening the narrative's key points with the melancholy refrains of Chopin. At least one key performance is over laden with shtick, and some fine-tuning of others is in order. Still, Doukas is terrific, delivering a consummate performance that arouses, for her long-suffering deceitful character, pity, disdain -- and admiration. Tony Amendola's licentious merchant is also top-notch. And alongside the story's bathos is its salient reminder of what cruelty, indifference and injustice can do to the human spirit.

(The show is double-cast.) Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood;
Thurs.-Sat., 7:30 p.m.; Sun., 4 p.m.; thru March 21. (818) 506-5436. An Antaeus Company production.