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“Cousin Bette” Plots Revenge

By Mary Mallory on February 10th, 2010



(L - R) Katherine Leigh, Jeremy Shouldis, Alicia Wollerton and Laura Wernette star in The Antaeus Company's world premiere production of "Cousin Bette." Photo: Michele K. Short

A wonderful adaptation by Jeffrey Hatcher of Honoré de Balzac's 1846 classic novel, featuring an excellent ensemble and dynamic design, Antaeus Company's "Cousin Bette" combines obsessive romance, vengeful plotting and stiletto-sharp humor to create delectable entertainment.

Cousin Bette (Alicia Wollerton), the Hulot family poor relation treated as a quaint but cuddly leftover, falls in love with sculptor Wenceslas Steinbock (Henri Lubatti) and successfully guides him into a commission with her cousin Hector Hulot (Barry Creyton), Minister of War. When Steinbock falls, instead, for Hulot's pretty daughter Hortense (Kellie Matteson), Bette vows spiteful revenge on her entire family.

Director Jeanie Hackett artfully sets up dialogue with both language and movement; lines and scenes gracefully crescendo into visceral explosions of emotion and humor, with a constant waltz of love, hate and desire between characters. The production flows with excellent timing and energy.

She draws outstanding work from the entire ensemble, led by the searing performance of Wollerton as Bette, a cross between Madame Defarge and Marquise de Merteuil. Creyton's Hector exudes a preening, prideful little boy charm. Lubatti makes Steinbock a charmingly naïve chess rook. Dana Green brings a lovely warmth and fragility to the young Valerie Marneffe.

Design work finely enhances the production, from Tom Buderwitz' richly detailed but spare sets, A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's gorgeously crafted period costumes, to Leigh Allen's evocative and nourish lighting.

“Cousin Bette” successfully blends intense emotion, manipulative scheming, passionate performances and razor-sharp humor to create a dazzling and thoughtful production.

Antaeus Company presents double casts in “Cousin Bette” Thursdays through Saturdays at 7:30 p.m. and Sundays at 4 p.m. through March 21 at Deaf West Theatre (5112 Lankershim Blvd. in North Hollywood). Tickets cost \$30. For information or reservations, call (818) 506-5436 or visit www.antaeus.org.

