

LAWEEKLY

Love Me Tender, Love Me Harsh

The dating game, L.A.-Style

By Steven Leigh Morris
Saturday, Mar 6 2010



Photo By Michele K. Short, Rebecca Mozo and Nike Doukas in Balzac's dating emporium

The New York Times reports a new trend for men marrying "up" — women who earn more than their grooms.

The economic realities of the past 30 years have manifested themselves quite obviously in guys being less and less able to offer, by themselves, financial support for their families, while the prevailing theme in the women's movement has shifted from women's place to women's equity in the workplace. How can these trends, and the shifting intersections of money and love, not affect dating?

Since the early 1500s, romantic plays have been written about the cruelty of arranged marriages versus the purity of love. Dating rituals have always been torn by the turbulent and often crashing flows of cash and hormones. Few ideas are more romantic than a young, poor, gifted artist, and a maiden's true feelings for his tenderness.

The young, gifted artist in Jeffrey Hatcher's new play — an adaptation of Balzac's serial novel, *Cousin Bette*, and going by the same title — forms one of the centerpieces of Jeanie Hackett's splendid production for Antaeus Company. This classical rep troupe has been staging readings, workshops and other developmental projects in Los Angeles since, I believe, the early 1500s, and this is their first stab at a first season. The intelligence of the play, the direction and the acting standards bode well. It's also one of at least a trio of productions on local stages grappling head-on with exigencies of love, sex, fidelity and dating.

The young, romantic artist in *Cousin Bette* is an ingenuous Polish sculptor, Wenceslas Steinbock (Daniel Bess), exiled in 19th-century Paris. (Note, this production is double-cast.) He catches the eye of the title character, played with a wry viciousness that floats just a few millimeters above fury, by Alicia Wollerton. Bette is a middle-aged spinster, a "poor relation" to an extended family whom Bette, also our narrator, introduces person by person (there are 16 actors in this ensemble), accompanied with critical commentary such as "He's an idiot." Were she living today, Bette would be posting such comments on other people's blogs.

Bette has good reason to be so embittered. Because of her failure to secure a spouse and the consequent poverty attached to that failure, she has been relegated to something between a shadow and a nonentity by her own extended family. Her love for poor Steinbock is unqualified. She finds patrons for his work and introduces him into her family, after which he promptly weds the daughter (Rebecca Mozo) of Bette's far more "successful" cousin, Adeline (Laura Wernette). The plot concerns Bette's vengeance upon her family for stealing her love. For her purpose, Bette plays upon the sexual obsession of her cousin's vain and slightly cadaverous husband, Baron Hector Hulot (John Prosky), by enlisting the services of a domestically abused hausfrau (Dana Green). Though Bette's passion for her Pole is unrequited, she lives with a kind of smoldering hope that he'll have a change of heart (good luck); the cause-and-effect quality of the play's emotional machinations has the suspense of a good game of billiards, and vaguely resembles those in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. After three hours of three acts, however, the contrivances start to poke through the skin like the ribs of someone who hasn't been eating enough. The plot, too clever by half, intrudes upon insight, in a production that can't avoid one's respect nonetheless.

Des McAnuff directed a 1988 film adaptation, and the Brits also filmed it back in 1971. Even here, there's a vaguely RSC/*Masterpiece Theatre* aesthetic that's partly vivacious because it's so well done, and just a little bit dated. Great costumes by A. Jeffrey Schoenberg and a simple yet baroque set by Tom Buderwitz.