

THE MALCONTENT

An overthrown national leader sneaks back into to his country in disguise, hoping to engineer a return to power. To do so, he must match wits with the new leader's ruthless, ambitious young protégé, who is having a secret affair with the new leader's beautiful young wife, who is in turn being pursued by a second handsome, unprincipled schemer. And that's just the start of two and a half hours of lust, intrigue, betrayal, passion and politics in John Marston's *The Malcontent*.

If all you knew about Marston's play was the above teaser, you might assume it to be an über-dramatic contemporary political thriller. In fact, it is a frequently hilarious 408-year-old satirical comedy-drama with more than a dash of Monty Python bawdiness, particularly as performed by the gifted classical actors of North Hollywood's *The Antaeus Company* under the inspired direction of Elizabeth Swain.

Note: As always, *The Antaeus Company* has double-cast all roles. The performers reviewed here (with one exception) are members of the "Cuckolds" cast, which alternates with the "Wittols," though there may be a Cuckold or two visiting the Wittols, or vice versa at any given performance.

Bo Foxworth is Altofront, the titular *Malcontent*, the rightful Duke of Genoa, who has been overthrown and banished by the conniving Mendoza (Ramón de Ocampo), who has been canoodling with the beauteous Aurelia (Jules Willcox), who ties the knot with the new Duke Pietro (Mark Doerr of *The Wittols*). Got that? Meanwhile, the noble Maria (Ann Noble), Altofront's imprisoned wife, waits stoically for her husband's return. Before long, a new arrival appears at Duke Pietro's court, an odd-looking bespectacled, behatted gentleman who calls himself Malevole. Three guesses as to who Malevole really is.

As might be expected, *The Malcontent* isn't the easiest play to follow, particularly as written in early 17th Century English by a playwright whose goal was to out-Shakespeare Shakespeare. Thankfully, *Antaeus* has provided reviewers with a handy plot guide, available for perusal and note-taking at the end of this review.

If *The Malcontent* is any example, the Jacobean (successors to the Elizabethans) were a ribald lot, *The Malcontent* providing numerous examples of the raunchy humor so popular in films these days. (That is to say, expect plenty of fart gags.) A look at the glossary *Antaeus* has provided playgoers attests to the play's bawdiness: bawd (pimp), burn cracks (farts), catso (penis), drab (harlot, slut), polecats (prostitutes), priapism (permanent erection) and (in case you were curious about *The Wittols*) wittol (a compliant cuckold).

Despite the convolutions of Marston's intricate plot and the often archaic phraseology of four-century-old English, Swain and her actors do their darnedest to insure clarity to contemporary audiences. The broadness of certain performances wouldn't seem out of place in *Spamalot*, but it keeps audience attention high where a subtler approach might not.

Amongst *The Cuckolds*, several performances prove true standouts, beginning with Foxworth's stellar turn as Altofront's intentionally eccentric alter ego Malevole. Foxworth gives us scenery chewing of the most delicious sort, which combined with the subtlety and genuineness of Malevole's disguise-free moments as Altofront make for some truly tour-de-force work. De Ocampo matches Foxworth every step of the way as a suave, ruthless schemer with an eye for the ladies. Swain has de Ocampo break the fourth wall with considerable frequency, either addressing the eight ticketholders assigned to sit four each on either side of Tom Buderwitz's gorgeously scaled-down version of a Jacobean stage, or walking up the center aisle to flirt with audience members of the fairer sex. It's a deliciously comic turn from one of our busiest and best young stage and screen actors.

Doerr does excellent, multilayered work as the usurping Duke, with extra snaps for performing opposite a cast with whom he has mostly not rehearsed. Surrounding him are an all-around terrific trio of corrupt courtiers: John Allee as Ferrardo, Jason Thomas as Prepasso, and Buck Zachary as Equato. Willcox combines movie star looks with classical acting chops in a standout turn as Aurelia, with Marisol Ramirez and Joanna Strapp providing bang-up backup as court ladies Bianca and Emilia. John Achorn scores comedic points time and again as elderly marshal Bilioso, Joe Holt makes for a stalwart, heroic Celso (Altofront's loyal, trusted friend and palace spy), and Adam Meyer cuts a fine figure as Ferneze, yet another unprincipled courtier (and Mendoza's rival for Aurelia's affections). Noble remains "imprisoned" backstage till the play's grand finale, and as those who've admired the award-winner's previous performances might surmise, it is worth the wait. Finally, there is the divine Lynn Milgrim in a subtly scene-stealing comedic gem of a performance as Maquerelle, whose advice "Cherish anything saving your husband" and wisdom "Honesty is but an art to seem so" and truth-telling "Youth and beauty once gone, we are like beehives without honey" make us laugh, even as they resonate still today.

As with previous Antaeus productions (*Cousin Bette*, *King Lear*, *The Autumn Garden*), *The Malcontent* is strikingly designed, from A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's stunningly detailed period fashions, to Elizabeth Harper's vivid lighting design to Peter Bayne's mood (and era)-setting sound design to Heather Ho's period-perfect properties design to Buderwitz's aforementioned scenic design. Heather Allyn has choreographed a couple of dance sequences that give additional sparkle to the evening, performed with precision and panache by a cast presumably full of non-dancers (though you'd hardly know it). Ritchard Druther is stage manager and Christopher Breyer is dramaturg.

Incredible as it may seem, after twenty years as "LA's Classical Theater Ensemble," this is only Antaeus's second full season. With this summer's Classicsfest promising a dozen or so readings and works-in-progress, and a fully-staged production of Noël Coward's little-known *Peace In Our Time* coming this fall, *The Malcontent* gets Season Two off to a smashing start.

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www.Antaeus.org

—Steven Stanley

