

THEATER



JOHN APICELLA

Mikael Salazar, left, and JD Cullum cross swords in the Antaeus Company's production of Juan Ruiz de Alarcón's 1619 comedy "The Liar."

Rhyming Time

After nearly 400 years, Juan Ruiz de Alarcón's "The Liar" still has some truths to reveal.

Theater Review

By MICHAEL PHILLIPS
TIMES THEATER CRITIC

At one point in "The Liar," a 1619 Spanish Golden Age comedy by Mexican-born Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, the prevaricator of the title waxes poetic about a romantic riverside banquet thrown for his lady love, someone in truth he hasn't really gotten to know yet.

The dinner, he tells the woman's increasingly jealous betrothed, came complete with Roman candles and solid-gold toothpicks. Utter fabrication. But as the Madrid knave unfurls his tall tale like so much bolt cloth, its details luxuriously improbable, you want to believe it all happened. It's like the seductive Queen Mab speech in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," which predates "The Liar" (original title: "La verdad sospechosa," or "The Truth Can't

Be Trusted") by a generation. Even if playwrights from other times and places do not, sometimes we forget the theater is a place to hear a writer let slip the dogs (even lying dogs) of pure eloquence.

Now in a brisk Antaeus Company staging, "The Liar" features a new rhyming verse English-language translation by Dakin Matthews. It's a crisp introduction to a little-seen work, highly influential in its day. Corneille, Goldoni, Moliere and others owe variously substantial debts to "The Liar" and to its Madrid-bred lawyer and dramatist.

The liar (played at last Sunday's matinee by JD Cullum) sets his eyes on the lovely Jacinta (Emily Chase), but he gets her name wrong, and without knowing it sets about wooing Lucrecia (Julia Fletcher) instead. Lies lead to mistaken identity snafus. They lead also to the incurred wrath and ready

sword of Jacinta's beau, Don Juan de Sosa (Richard Miró).

Director Anne McNaughton and company take these plotty complications at an impressive trot. Cullum's boyish way with the b.s. activates the comedy nicely—though the actor, a good one, has a habit of fixing his gaze at a halfway point between his fellow actors and the audience. Chase's Jacinta is bright and open; Ralph Drischell's Don Sancho and J. Michael Flynn's Don Felx add authoritative character support.

Alarcón avoids pure farcical stereotypes and easy hero/villain square-offs. You wish the comic escalations were more on a par with the best of Restoration and post-Restoration comedy. "The Liar" holds the stage nonetheless. And Matthews' translation honors a key aspect of the original, that of the four-line *redondilla*, the first line rhyming with the fourth, and the second with the third. (It's explained nicely in the Antaeus study guide.)

Following its North Hollywood run, the Antaeus production moves to the Siglo de Oro Festival in El Paso, Texas.

This modestly effective staging should travel easily—lying being a universal language, right behind musical, beauty and, of course, "Cats."

BE THERE

"The Liar," the Antaeus Company, Secret Rose Theatre, 11246 Magnolia Blvd., North Hollywood. Fridays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2:30 p.m. Also Feb. 27 at 7 p.m. Ends Feb. 27. \$16-\$20. (818) 506-5436. Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes.