THEATER

Mikael Salazar, left, and JD Callum 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 provoker of the title waxes poetic about a romantic riverside banquet drawn for his lady love, someone in truth he hasn’t really gotten to know yet.

The dinner, he tells the women’s increasingly jealous betruefe, came complete with roman candles and solid-gold toothpicks. Utter fabrication. But as the Madrid knife sharpens his talk takes on such a heavy cloth its details are convoluted improbable, you want to believe it all happened. It’s like the seductive Queen Mab speech in Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet,” which precedes “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 theatre 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 Dànkin Matthews. It’s a crisp introduction to a little-seen work, highly influential in its day. Cornelle, Godot, Molière and others owe variously substantial debts to “The Liar” and to its Madrid-born lawyer and dramatist.

The liar (played at last Sunday’s matinee by JD Callum) sets his eyes on the lovely Jaqueta (Sh Aly Chase), but he gets her name wrong and without knowing it sets about wooing Lucetta (Julia Fletcher) instead. Lies lead to mistaken identity mishaps. They lead also to the incurred wrath and ready sword of Jaquita’s beau, Don Juan de Sosa (Richard Miro).

Director Anne McNaughton and company take these plot complications at an impressively trot. Callum’s boyish way with the b.s. animates 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 Jaquita is bright and open; Ralph Drischell’s Don Sánchez and J. Michael Flynn’s Don Felix add authoritative character support.

Alarcón avoids pure farcical stereotypes and easy hero/villain square-offs. You with the comic escapades 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 music, beauty and, of course, “Cats.”

BE THERE

“The Liar,” the Antaeus Company.
Secret Rose Theatre, 11245 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-$40. (818) 598-5436. Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes.