



Making and Breaking Traditions

Two classical theater companies take different roads to excellence

~ By DON SHIRLEY ~

Two classical theater ensembles emerged in L.A. in 1991. But their creators followed very different theater-rearing philosophies.

Antaeus started big. It was intended to be the classical wing of L.A.'s flagship company, Center Theatre Group. It also was conceived with Hollywood scheduling exigencies in mind. Roles would be double- or triple-cast, freeing actors to take quick screen jobs without relying on under-trained understudies. Audiences might return to see different actors playing the same part. CTG would pay no more for two or three Antaeus actors than for one actor in a conventionally cast production.

CTG provided offstage support for the budding group. But only once did Antaeus create a mainstage production for CTG's Mark Taper Forum – Chekhov's *The Wood Demon*, in 1994. Soon, it became clear that if Antaeus wanted to produce full-length runs with any regularity, the company would have to rely on the low-paying (and low-profile) 99-seat arena – which Antaeus has used, intermittently, for more than a decade.

Meanwhile, Glendale's *A Noise Within* started small. It used Actors' Equity's 99-Seat Plan for five years before moving its productions up to 144 seats (and an Equity contract). It hasn't dabbled in double- or triple-casting. But each year, it has produced two seasons of rotating repertory, three plays per season, with a consistency that has never been approached by Antaeus.

Fortunately, both companies are still with us – in fact, both are conducting capital campaigns for larger quarters. And both are currently doing some of their best work.

Antaeus is currently presenting Noel Coward's *Tonight at 8:30*, a 1936 compendium of one-acts, divided into two separate bills. "If Love Were All" includes *Star Chamber*, *We Were Dancing*, *The Astonished Heart* and *Hands Across the Sea*. The plays in "Come the Wild" are *Red Peppers*, *Fumed Oak* (both of which leave Coward's usual upper-crust world for grittier milieus), *Still Life*, and *Family Album*.

The physical scale is small – the venue is the little Deaf West Theatre in NoHo. But the collection of talent is staggering: 42 actors and six directors, many of them among L.A.'s finest.

I attended a "marathon" of both parts. The "If Love Were All" matinee was slightly delayed because actress Ann Gee Byrd was unable to get out of fire-wracked Malibu. The other actors who share her "If Love Were All" roles, Melinda Peterson and Amelia White, were summoned. Validating the Antaeus philosophy, Peterson and White were delightful when the show went on. So was just about everyone else.

At 8 p.m. (not 8:30, despite the umbrella title), "Come the Wild" started, now with Byrd on hand. A rousing rendition of Coward's sardonic "Why Must the Show Go On?" preceded the plays – especially ironic, under the circumstances.

The casts are likely to differ at each performance. I was particularly struck by how smoothly Shannon Holt, a veteran actress in cutting-edge new plays, entered Coward's world – as did Phil Proctor, who's probably still best known for his work with the crazed Firesign Theatre decades ago.

A Noise Within, too, is tackling the work of an early 20th-century Brit (along with the previously acclaimed *Waiting for Godot* and *A Winter's Tale*). James Barrie's *Dear Brutus*, from 1917, is a fantasy about a group of country house guests who are transported to the world of what-might-have-been in a strange forest. Director Julia Rodriguez-Elliott's staging is lush and accomplished. It's a treat to watch the great Mitchell Edmonds, the only actor in all three of the company's plays, complete his trifecta with irresistible gusto. Seeing the same actor doing three different roles, as well as seeing different actors in the same role, is one of the distinctive joys of classical rep. ★

Tonight at 8:30. Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, (866) 811-4111. Antaeus.org. Closes Dec. 23. Dear Brutus. A Noise Within, 234 S. Brand Blvd., Glendale, (818) 240-0910. Anoisewithin.org. Closes Dec. 16.