

## LA's Secret Pleasures



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One of the secret pleasures of living in Los Angeles is its vibrant and mostly unheralded theater scene. Unlike New York or London, where throngs of tourists flock to big Broadway and West End shows and local audiences are keenly attuned to the latest hit show, theater in Los Angeles is largely overshadowed by the global entertainment industry that is headquartered here. Tourists are more likely to visit Grauman's Chinese Theater than a stage production in one of LA's hundreds of theater venues. And locals are more attuned to the buzz of an upcoming film or hot music act than rave reviews for a new play.

At the same time, Los Angeles is home to more acting, directing, playwriting and musical theater talent than New York or London combined. LA is a magnet for stage talent who have made the leap to paying gigs in film, television or music, but still want to exercise their acting muscles in live theater. While New York and London may try to quibble, the simple fact is that LA has more theatrical talent per square mile than other city on the planet.

The odd counterpoint between a city bursting at the seams with theatrical talent and an audience largely indifferent to theater makes for a crazy, fascinating jumble of theatrical textures and experiences. Since there is very little hierarchy to the theater scene -- unlike New York and London where there is a more delineated theatrical structure -- LA theater is like a wild, untamed garden, bursting with weeds, but also alive with vivid splashes of color and hidden treasures.

One of those hidden treasures is the Antaeus Ensemble Company, a group of classically-trained actors with impressive Broadway credits and busy careers in the entertainment industry. Founded in 1991 as an offshoot of the Mark Taper Forum, Antaeus has been producing world-class revivals of classic plays from the Greeks and Shakespeare to Ibsen, O'Neill and Beckett, all on a shoestring budget in small theaters around LA.

In most other cities in the world, productions with this level of performance would be sold out for months, with lines around the block to get in - witness a similar production of *The Tempest* this year at London's Old Vic, where I was lucky to snag a ticket to a sold-out performance. But it is the great good fortune of LA theatergoers that tickets to stellar productions with breathtaking performances are readily available.

One example is Antaeus's current production of Lillian Hellman's *Autumn Garden*, a jewel of a play by one of the twentieth century's most important playwrights. Set in a small Gulf coast resort after the end of World War II, the play is a poignant and even bitter evocation of Hellman's life, including her long affair with Dashiell Hammett, the brilliant and alcoholic author of *The Maltese Falcon* and other hard-boiled detective tales. Directed by veteran Larry Biederman - whose credits span New York and regional theater - the production has a sprawling ensemble cast, chock full of impressive talent.

The cast includes Jane Kaczmarek, familiar to fans of the TV series *Malcolm in the Middle*, but with a long list of Broadway and regional theater credits, as well as Kurtwood Smith from *That '70s Show*, Kitty Swink, Jeffrey Nordling, Stephen Caffrey and a gifted ensemble with a string of film, television and theater credits. The play, like all shows at Antaeus, are double-cast, a nod not only to the busy schedule of the performers, but also a chance for audiences to see a variety of actors in the different roles.

One of the golden ages in theatrical history was the early 1950's in London, when Britain still had a thriving film industry, but also was the vibrant hub of English-speaking theater. From actors Lawrence Olivier and Richard Burton to playwrights Harold Pinter and Joe Orton, London was a magical place for theater, with actors, writers and directors spending their days making films and their nights performing live theater. While LA may not quite replicate the heyday of London theater - primarily because of indifferent audiences, threadbare finances and a dismissive national theater community - it still has the excitement and vibrancy of a city where theatrical talent is literally overflowing in hundreds of small theaters.