Anne Gee Byrd and Dawn Didawick play witty Southern matriarch Mary Ellis in the Antaeus Company’s double-cast revival of Hellman’s most Chekhovian play, set in a Gulf Coast summer house in 1949. Culture Monster chatted with them for The Spotlight, a new weekly look at the people who work in L.A. theater.

**Question:** What’s the key to this character?

**Byrd:** Mrs. Ellis understands that the glass is half-empty, but that’s OK. You just put a little ice in it.

**Didawick:** Mrs. Ellis was born in 1879 and lived through women getting the vote. She grew up in a world where you had to pretend that men run things.

**Byrd:** That’s still the case!

**Q:** Why was the year her husband died the best year of Mrs. Ellis’ life?

**Byrd:** I was married a long time to a man I loved very much. But in widowhood there are things I have done that I would never have pursued if I hadn’t had this time. So I understand Mrs. Ellis’ sentiment.

**Didawick:** In my secret back story, Mr. Ellis had a racing problem. She had to contend with all of that. She can’t stand lies, yet she knows how to deflect really well.

**Q:** Her new-found freedom leads her to give very funny advice about sex and money.

**Byrd:** That’s because she holds the hope that others in the play will find the freedom she wanted for herself.

**Q:** How do your interpretations differ?

**Didawick:** Well, Anne Gee is a tall, thin, regal woman, and I’m a Southern dumpling.

**Byrd:** Dawn is much warmer than I am.

**Didawick:** That’s one of the beauties of double casting. You find out how a play can support such different interpretations.

**Q:** What drew you to “The Autumn Garden”?

**Byrd:** The play asks how much illusion is required to get through life -- and at what point do those illusions become toxic.

**Q:** What have you learned about life over 60?

**Byrd:** That the party wasn't anywhere else.

**Didawick:** That will be your epitaph, and now I can’t steal it.

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Charlotte Stoudt

"The Autumn Garden” is at the Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, through Dec. 19.