A summer hotel in an autumn garden

THE UPPER-CLASS VOICE OF LILIAN

Hellman rings across the elegantly furnished living room of a summer hotel on the Gulf Coast. She’s not there, of course, but the 12-person ensemble presenting her play “The Autumn Garden” echoes the attitudes and manners that one often sees in her award-winning drama as In “The Autumn Garden,” however, which Hellman considered the best of her plays, the tone has mellowed a bit. The characters, friends of many years, confront each other with anger or muted sarcasm, but do not attack with the mean-spiritedness of the others in some of her other plays, like “The Little Foxes” or “Toys in the Attic.”

And that’s as it should be, because these characters are into their autumn years — or later — (as was Hellman), and fairly well marooned in the lives they made for themselves. Each of them has a story, and each, because he or she is so excellent an actor, manages to flesh out and humanize his character, no matter how small the role. If there is a central character, it is Nicholas (Jeffrey Nordling), a dissolve and disillusioned artist, returning to the summer hotel after many years in Paris. With him is his wife Nina (Kitty Skrink), who puts up with his drunken outbursts and his wandering eye because she still loves him. And because she says, every once in a while he goes on “a rampage of good will.”

Constance (Shannon Hall) also loves Nicky. She is an awkward, twitchy spinster to whom Nicky was once engaged. Constance is the owner of the summer hotel and she runs it with her young niece, Sophie (Jeannie Syquia), a refugee from the war in Europe. (The play, written in 1931, is set two years earlier.) Also present is Constance’s long-time suitor Edward (Josh Clark), who chides her after she delivers a long rambling speech, with “You’re very wise, Constance. It must come from not thinking.”

Sophie is engaged to a young man, Frederick (Josh Ackerman), whose mother and grandmother (Eve Gordon and Dana Di Cicco) are also guests in the house. This relationship, between the two young people, is the only one that remains an unresolved mystery, however. They are polite and formal with each other, demonstrating little affection, yet they continue to make plans for their upcoming affair. Their quirky relationship is never explained, leaving the viewer to fill in the blanks. Is Sophie just wanting to escape from her life as a maid? Is she looking for security and a green card? Or is she making the best of what life has offered her? Frederick’s motivation is also unclear. Is he escaping the overbearing attention of his mother and grandmother, or is he having an affair with his mentor, Mr. Payson? (Frederick’s mother makes an oblique reference to “that filthy little scandal in Rome.”) Or is he setting for a woman he believes will be malleable and compliant? An assumption that may be a little iffy, as Sophie demonstrates in an emotional outburst that shows she has a mind of her own.

And finally, there is the General (Kurtwood Smith) and his unhappy, ditzy wife (Rhonda Aldrich) who never stops prattling. They are an ill-matched couple and it is clear that the General is planning to beat a hasty retreat when the summer vacation is over.

“The Autumn Garden” runs for three hours, but it justifies the length by maintaining its interest. It’s a collection of extraordinarily fine actors, extremely well directed by Larry Biederman, moving through a beautiful set gracefully designed by Tom Badgley.

Lillian Hellman would be so proud!

The Antaeus Company has produced “The Autumn Garden” with two completely different casts and I think, equally wonderful. The play is presented at the Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd. in North Hollywood, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. through Dec. 19. Call (818) 506-1983 for reservations and cast schedule.

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