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[Back to Dale Reynolds' Reviews](#)

[Antaeus Interview](#)



When does any theatre company know it is on an ascendant? What is the *zeitgeist* from which one can know one is in the right direction? Certainly great reviews from respected critics, box-office revenues that reflect audiences' tastes, and the general feel-good that artists and artisans pick up on from each other can and do contribute to the feeling that a theatre's time has come.

So, the concept of *zeitgeist* has hit some of the quality classical theatre companies in the Los Angeles area. **Antaeus Classical Theatre Ensemble**, along with Glendale's (soon to be Pasadena's) **A Noise Within Theatre**, and to a much lesser-degree, West Hollywood's **Classical Theatre Lab** and Lisa Wolpe's **Women's Shakespeare Theatre**, are all finding audiences who are paying attention.

So what goes into making a company "right for the times"? According to Jeanie Hackett, a classical and television actress herself, and current artistic director of Antaeus, "While we can't afford the right kind of marketing, we have spent years laying down the foundation for a quality company – building up an administrative system [that includes financial donors] and spending much time building a meaningful artistic company [actors, directors, technical staff] – thus, we've hit a critical mass. This is our first-ever season of full-length plays and we are finding a core audience. Now, we have to keep them."

Hackett acknowledges that their season of three full-length plays (Balzac's COUSIN BETTE this Winter, the two companies of Shakespeare's KING LEAR, and the upcoming fall production of Lillian Hellman's THE AUTUMN GARDEN) will lose them a lot of money, even when they sell-out in their comfortable 49-seat venue for the past three years, Deaf West Theatre, in North Hollywood, California. "There's an audience for what we do, but we need a larger venue to expand into."

Part of their success stems from the nuts-and-bolts of any theatre company: hard intellectual work surrounding their mission statements and full-bore fund-raising. She is insistent that Antaeus should concentrate on the classics – mostly European-based plays (Chekhov, Shakespeare, Wilde, Coward, Twain, Sheridan) – but also acknowledges that there's nothing to stop them from making musicals, which they did in 2008, with AMERICAN TALES, two one-act musicals based on material from Mark Twain and Herman Melville. It was well-received by the critics, but wasn't noticed much by the public. "It was then we realized (that) we had to re-structure ourselves from top to bottom. We stopped producing [in 2009] and concentrated on building up our graphics, our box-office, our volunteers and our donor-base. So now we can plunge into producing."

As a result of great reviews for this year's endeavors, the public is strongly paying attention. But marketing remains a huge issue for them, along with every other theatre company. "We have an email list of around, 6500 – a truly loyal following,-- which is a good start." Surprisingly, Hackett has been hearing from other professionals that **Antaeus** has raised the bar for the theatrical community. "It pleased me to hear that. Double casting, I believe, is a huge part of [that praise]. We're in Hollywood; we know that actors can't commit to us totally because of our extremely low salaries, so by double-casting, actors know they're covered when more remunerative work comes their way and, also, our audiences don't have to worry about [under-rehearsed] understudies."

Hackett speaks well of her main competition, **A Noise Within**. "The classics – European, Latin American, and American – have an audience that wants to see them done well. Plays that matter. A great teacher of mine used to say 'all audiences don't want to see a bowl of apples; they want to see a *Matisse* bowl of apples. **AWN** has a great track record and a great aesthetic." Much the same can be said of their work, as well. "A lot of our work – workshoped plays, cold- or rehearsed- readings -- doesn't get seen, but it helps the actors. And audiences are hungry for great material. At Williamstown (MA), Chekhov became the hottest ticket around. The artistic director took years to train his audiences to enjoy Chekhov – they came because they knew they'd have a great time. Same with us. When they hear we're doing a Shakespeare, they know they're going to have a great time."

Sometimes, of course, experiments don't pan out as planned. AMERICAN TALES, the two one-act musicals, showed that even when quality is apparent, and reviews are strong, some audiences don't get it. "One-act musicals aren't popular. We worked hard on it, but nothing happened. Still, we build the groundwork for the next project all the time." The most important aspect of that work is sitting around that library table, with a gorgeous library full of plays and tomes about the theatre, working on text. "We're a team already. We get along well. It was Dakin Matthews who got us started on that. Work, try, fail and succeed. It's all the same work."

A shared aesthetic and language – it’s not just social. There’s important crosstalk between directors and actors – everyone can share and we don’t keep our mouths shut. We’ve built a special magic, which can’t be accomplished overnight.”

Antaeus is nineteen years old now – a rare beast in theatrically-naive Los Angeles. “People are committed. Our theatre’s like a religion -- we have a temple here, fueled by a passion within the company; it’s how we’ve become a collective. We’re all management, all producers, all artists. Everyone is invested in their future.”

Hackett had been Artistic Director of the now fallen **Classical Theatre Lab** (based in West Hollywood). While there, she built up a paying training company that she brought over to **Antaeus**. Matthews (currently a great King Lear) was a co-founder and first Artistic Director of their company and when he couldn’t shoulder the responsibilities any longer, she and John Apicella became co-artistic-directors and she became sole director last year. They have three associate-directors, Kitty Swink, Ann G. Byrd and Ari Gross – veterans all of classic acting – who do much of the heavy lifting. The members of the company – 120-strong -- contribute \$25 a month, much volunteer time, supplies, etc.

With so many actors to be picked from, how and when do they add to the company? “We audition for guest artists once a year. The chosen are on probation for a year, while we watch and evaluate them: Talented though they may be, is this person going to be a good ensemble member? Can we successfully double-cast them in one of our plays?”

Antaeus also has a second company, what they label the Academy Company, who are relatively younger, mostly classically-untried young actors who haven’t been very well exposed to the Classics. “We introduce them to the Greeks, Elizabethan playwrights, Restoration comedies, Jacobean tragedies, Shaw, Wilde, etc. We watch to see who has the potential to join us in playing the younger roles. We’ve managed to develop and cultivate the best.

As to their future, she admits that they’re running to just stay in place. “We barely have the staff to keep up. And at this pace, it runs some of us into the ground. But with our new donor-base, we should be able to maintain this year and plan for next year.” **Deaf West Theatre** has willingly shared their space with them, for rental-money they use to keep themselves afloat. The past two years (and what looks to be yet another year) of a sour economy, has hit everyone hard. “We have the wherewithal to continue building an audience for what we do. And should a city-owned building come our way, as a permanent home, we’ll build a new theatre.”

So, where *did* they find financial backers? “A lot of our company work on television and in films, so they, along with their friends, have invested in us. We have a new Board of Directors and about thirty individuals who have pledged to make annual pledges, from a thousand-to five-thousand- dollars a year. Others funds have come from the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, the Los Angeles City Cultural Affairs, along with foundation support from Wells-Fargo Bank and the Miller Foundation. And, with all these new people coming to KING LEAR, many are making donations on top of what they pay on the ticket price.

In addition to the three announced plays, they're also producing a new version of their CLASSIC FEST, workshopped-plays – on- and off-book – and rehearsed readings of plays that have survived the march of time. “We have great classical actors out here [in Los Angeles], with no good place to grow. This allows us to work on plays in a short-amount of time, leaving them free to audition and film television shows and feature films. And it's great for an audience, as they are allowed in to see the process. And for only \$10 a night. We allow important actors to gravitate to important authors and as it's all about 'process' and not about 'results,' people flock to see us.”

And would it make sense to work with the other classical venues, to share costs? “It might, but we think we attract different audiences as we are in different part of town. Also, Geoff Edwards and Julia Rodriguez [managers of **A Noise Within**] are more interested in Repertory, which they can do as they pay a full Actors Equity salary to their actors. I also think that our ideas are different and that it's extremely important not to dilute our individualities.” **Antaeus** pays dues to the Los Angeles Stage Alliance, which helps in getting marketing costs reduced at the ever-shrinking Los Angeles Times and other outlets.

So, can Classical Theatre survive in turbulent times, when audiences are more apt to want light comedies and lavish musicals? Yes, as it turns out, so be sure to visit one of them soon, to be sure, really sure, they'll be here next year and the year after that.