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## November 2010

[click title](#)**THE AUTUMN GARDEN**  
THE ANTAEUS COMPANY**BECKY SHAW**  
SOUTH COAST REPERTORY**GREAT EXPECTATIONS**  
A NOISE WITHIN**ROCK 'N' ROLL**  
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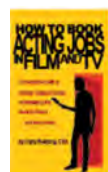
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[CLICK FOR MORE INFO](#)Lily Knight, Stephen Caffrey in *The Autumn Garden* | Ed Krieger

## Accommodations

In 1951, the year Lillian Hellman's *Autumn Garden* premiered on Broadway, a social scientist published his first book on the psychology of organizations. While Elliott Jaques saw workplace "social systems as defense against unconscious anxiety," the dramatist showed how the fundamental social system of marriage produces it.

Sixty years later, the seldom-produced play Hellman called her favorite (over more popular titles like *The Children's Hour*, *The Little Foxes*, *Another Part of the Forest* and *Toys in the Attic*) surfaces to close The Antaeus Company's 2010 season (through December 17).

Guest Director Larry Biederman's rotating casts ("Idealists," reviewed here, and "Dreamers") sprawl across Tom Buderwitz' porch-and-sunroom set, creating the proper tone of languor and disillusion. It's a mildly Chekhovian, Mid-Century study of mid-life crisis, well before that concept was coined, by Jaques, in 1965. Walter Kerr noted that "with *The Autumn Garden*, the transition is finally made [from Hellman's emulation of Ibsen to characterization that] is ruefully Chekhovian, the mood of the play is the principal guide to its meaning."

Although the playwright insisted the title was an afterthought with no more meaning than her first choice, "Play No. 8," the double-edged metaphor of endeavoring to reseed, or simply recede as winter approaches, is apt. In September 1949, in a small, gossip-bound town on the Gulf, 100 miles east of New Orleans, most of the dozen characters will have the self-deluding dreams that have sustained them exposed, and be forced to accept their lot, or make the necessary changes to — use another anticipated concept of Hellman's, live authentically. Only Mrs. Ellis, widowed and glad of it, is reconciled to her fate, as she sprinkles her hard-won wisdom to nurture the others' better ambitions and extinguish the ludicrous.

The once-grand Tuckerman home is an extended-stay residence for a group of "permanent summer guests," who have become annual regulars. The current crop are an extended family for Constance Tuckerman (Lily Knight), the unmarried proprietor. They are General Griggs (James Sutorius), his wife Rose (Faye Grant), and the Ellises — Mother Mary (Anne Gee Byrd), daughter-in-law Carrie (Jeanie Hackett), and grandson Frederick (Joe Delafield).

Helping Constance run the place is her French niece, Sophie (Zoe Perry), in America to search of the kind of security war-torn Europe will be slow in providing. So far, she has landed a lukewarm engagement with Frederick, who prefers dreams of celebrity on the coattails of a mysterious dilettante, the offstage Mr. Payson. Also helping is the housekeeper Leona (Sandra McClain in both casts).

The play begins on a Thursday evening in which three events upset the established routine. First, a party across the street has Rose and Sophie anxious for a rare evening with their men. Unfortunately, neither man is interested. For Frederick, it's because of the second event, a call from Payson to announce a morning deadline for the proofreading Frederick is doing on Payson's manuscript. Third, and most importantly, Nick and Nina Denery (Stephen Caffrey and Jane Kaczmarek) will soon be arriving from Europe, with their aide, Hilda (Reba Waters).

Years ago, Constance was engaged to Nick, who had been a childhood friend. He was a dashing young man with artistic talent who once painted a portrait. The real reason for his visit is to get the painting for a "retrospective." He also wants to paint an updated companion portrait. Knowing he is married, she is nevertheless quite anxious to see him, expecting his presence to restore the bloom of youth she had when he broke their engagement by deserting her. It all causes Edward Crossman (Stoney Westmoreland), to retreat further into the silence of his long-surpassed love for her.

Caffrey's arrival has the effect of heart-replacement surgery. If, as Hellman claims, she "is not crazy about plays in which nothing happens," she needs a Nick like Caffrey, who manages to be big and full of bravado, yet childlike and insensitive. He is a bull in the China shop, upsetting everything and everyone. Nina is just as tricky a role. One scholar writes that she is motivated by hatred of Nick, and that has driven him to his constant flirting. Harold Clurman, the original director, writes that "following Nick is the only way she knows of 'filling' her life." Kaczmarek is uncommonly adept at both ends of the comedy-drama pool, and uses the full range. Her Nina takes a backseat to Nick's grandstanding, portraying another relationship dysfunctions Hellman anticipated: "co-dependence." Nina is baffled when Sophie lumps her as complicit in her husband's portrait-painting con. So are we, given Kaczmarek's creation — likeable and long-suffering. But on reflection, she's an equal partner in his crimes of the heart.

The play's premiere reception nearly 60 years ago generated a mixed response of moderate appreciation and criticism. While it was deemed Ms. Hellman's best play — by her and her critics — it feels quiet. It is placid, drifting, almost glacial in its drift, like age. What it needs is a Nick Denery who will blow and capsize all the bobbing little dreamers. And, Stephen Caffrey gives a gale-force performance.

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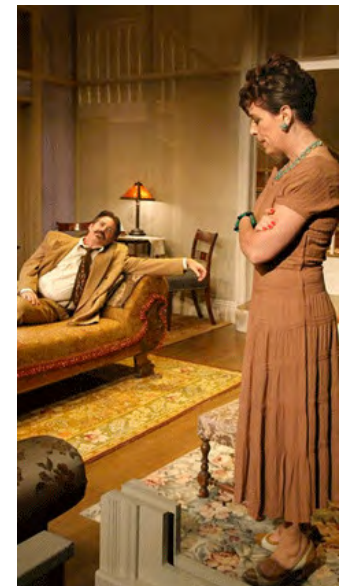
## THE AUTUMN GARDEN

by LILLIAN HELLMAN  
directed by LARRY BIEDERMAN

### THE ANTAEUS COMPANY

October 22-December 19, 2010  
(Opened 10/28, Rev'd 10/29)

**CAST** (Those reviewed in **bold** followed by alternating actor in that role): **Anne Gee Byrd**/Dawn Didawick, **Stephen Caffrey**/Jeffrey Nordling, **Joe Delafield**/Josh Zuckerman, **Faye Grant**/Rhonda Aldrich, **Jeanie Hackett**/Eve Gordon, **Jane Kaczmarek**/Kitty Swink, **Lily Knight**/Shannon Holt, **Sandra McClain** (both casts), **Zoe Perry**/Jeanne Syquia, **Sandra McClain**, **James Sutorius**/Kurtwood Smith, **Reba Walters**/Susan Boyd Joyce, **Stoney Westmoreland**/Josh Clark



Caffrey, Jane Kaczmarek | Krieger

**PRODUCTION** Tom Buderwitz, set; Tina Haatainen-Jones, John Eckert, lights; John Zalewski, Ritz Gray/Laura Perez, stage management

**HISTORY** Originally premiered on Broadway in March 1951, directed by Harold Clurman



Angela Goethals, Graham Michael Hamilton and Brian Avers in *Becky Shaw* / Henry DiRocco

## BECKY SHAW

### Sharp wits

**In the mid-19th Century, Becky Sharp, the crafty "anti-protagonist" of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, used feminine guile in an attempt to rise against England's class system. In the early 21st, Gina Gionfriddo's *Becky Shaw*, the title character of her most successful play to date, takes a similar course, but without the same strict social structure to upheave, or the wit with which to do it.**

What she has is need and ruthlessness, and under Pam MacKinnon's capable direction at South Coast Repertory (through November 21), those qualities will gradually distance her from the audience as they insinuate her into the lives of the other characters.

Like the earlier novel, Gionfriddo's dark-if-not-black comedy follows an underprivileged outsider trying to gain security by attaching herself to another family. If the cohesion of the family Shaw targets and the talents she has to impress them have lessened, what propels her is just as powerful as Sharp's.

In Gionfriddo's modern world, finances are again as important as family. However, gaining wealth in the contemporary America she portrays has less to do with overcoming social strictures like those in Britain, or even the lingering stains of American race and gender discrimination. It still has to do with class, but now it's class in the form of intelligence, sophistication and wit. Shaw's date-night dress would not be laughable if it was all she could afford. It's presented as in ridiculously bad taste. Sharp wits and acerbic quips are the exchange currency of the family Shaw wants to infiltrate. And Gionfriddo's ability to provide Shaw's marks with sharp one-liners is as muscled as the best contemporary comedy writing.

In fact, if there's a weakness, it's that there are so many zingers flying around the stage that an artificiality creeps in, as if we're seeing a family of Vaudevillians who forget to drop the act. The *patter familia* that plays together, *schticks* together.

Gionfriddo is author of a half-dozen produced plays with nearly as many major grants and awards – including the Blackburn and Merrill from the first category and a Pulitzer nomination for *Shaw* from the second.

Becky Shaw (Angela Goethals) may have the play's title, but, arriving late in the first act, she does not have the protagonist's post position. That belongs to Suzanna Slater (Tessa Auberjonois), who has already earned our sympathies in the opening scene. Still mourning her father months after his death, she is given a sarcastic shaking up by "semi-sibling" Max Garrett (Brian Avers). Garrett's father was a business partner of the late, great Slater. But unable to raise Max, he, let his big-hearted partner give his son a home. Slater also gave Max the homeschooling in business that led to his current status as the family's ace financial advisor. He has set up a meeting with Suzanna and her mother, Susan (Barbara Tarback), to discuss their assets.

In that opening scene, Auberjonois and Avers gradually allow banter to build sexual tension that will eventually crest the berm of propriety they've maintained. Could there be a troth on the other side, now that they've compromised their hands-off policy? No. Suzanna knows Max too well to swap his reliable fraternity for the perils of matrimony. She moves instead to a lower-wattage but longer-lasting bulb named Andrew Porter (Graham Michael Hamilton). It is Andrew who suggests that his co-worker Becky might hit it off with Max.

With her foot in the door, Shaw manages to keep it there. The play proceeds with plenty of plot to keep things interesting and plenty of sharply sculpted comedy to keep it entertaining. Beyond Shaw's con artistry, Gionfriddo has something to say about modern relationships: They're nearly impossible. Love and love-making are unfathomable games without instructions. Pornography reflects the emptiness: One man enjoys it; it makes the other man weep.

Ms. Auberjonois is back keeping it real after her hilariously arch portrayal of Chick in SCR's *Crimes of the Heart* earlier this year. She is the heart of the staging, trading barbs with Max one minute, worrying about Andrew's relationship with Becky the next, and keeping all the unpredictable action on a realistic footing. Avers steals the show without pocketing it. His Max is as untrustworthy as he is hilarious. He has the comic zest of pre-political Dennis Miller. Goethals is able to transform from put-upon misfit to manipulative golddigger without a ruffle. It's a fine characterization that stays in bounds. And, as Andrew, the least flashy role, Mr. Hamilton is a nice fit. Tarback, too, manages to play stern without sacrificing a single opportunity to milk her laughlines.

On a beautifully realized rotating set by Daniel Ostling, in costumes by Sara Ryung Clement, and under the lights of Lap Chi Chu, the physical space is tasteful and thankfully to scale – not attempting to fill the entire stage (until the time is right). Incidental sounds and music are provided by Michael K. Hooker.

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