



Jaimi Paige and Daniel Blinkoff

PHOTO BY KARIANNE FLAATHEN

Stage //

# HEDDA AND SHOULDERS ABOVE THE REST

Andrew Upton's updated version of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* blows the cobwebs off a century-old story

BY DEBORAH KLUGMAN

If you're someone who usually dismisses 19th-century theater classics as stuffy and stiff, you might want to reconsider and go see *Hedda Gabler* at Antaeus Theatre Company, where Jaimi Paige delivers a mesmerizing performance as the beautiful and manipulative title character.

Henrik Ibsen's play caused a scandal after its premiere in 1891. At the time, despite Norway's growing women's movement, women were regarded as intellectually inferior to men, suitable solely for marriage and motherhood. Unlike Nora in *A Doll's House*, who does her best to be dutiful before an epiphany spurs her to famously fly the nest, Hedda lacks the courage to defy society; instead, she sublimates her anger and frustration by pulling the strings of her good-hearted new husband, Tesman (a spot-on Adrian LaTourelle), her besotted ex-suitor, Lovborg (Daniel Blinkoff), and anyone else unfortunate enough to cross her path.

Lovborg is a brilliant but troubled man, and the tragedy upon which the drama turns is his loss of an original manuscript; as it's decades before either carbon paper or computers, there is no copy. Having learned of this, Hedda ensures that he will never get it back, and in doing so destroys his life, and ultimately her own. (It's a weirdly convoluted act of vengeance, given it's she who rejects him — twice! — and not the other way around.)

The old-fashioned melodrama surrounding this incident doesn't detract

from the story. Ibsen's aim was to portray a highly intelligent but mentally unstable person, perilously mired not only in the dictates of convention but in the fears and out-of-control impulses that direct her behavior. He succeeded brilliantly, as his place in the pantheon of great European dramatists attests to.

Directed by Steven Robman, Andrew Upton's updated version, which debuted in New York in 2006 with Cate Blanchett (his wife) as Hedda, preserves the strength of the original while dusting off some cobwebs and bringing the character of Hedda into bright, contemporary focus.

As Judge Brack, the serpentine man-about-town who sees through Hedda's machinations, Tony Amendola is excellent. Ann Noble, who has succeeded so often in strong female roles, has either been miscast or misdirected as an overly mousy Thea, a married gal who loves Lovborg and is willing to give up everything for him — precisely what Hedda can't bring herself to do. Blinkoff comes off as rather subdued for an extraordinary intellectual who also rouses the passions of both these women.

There's nothing in these portrayals that cannot be recalibrated, however. The production is strong, and it's impossible not to be fascinated by Paige when her Hedda, beautifully costumed by Leah Piehl, moves gracefully but with malign purpose across the stage. (Note: The production is double cast.)

HEDDA GABLER | Antaeus Theatre Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood | Through July 17 | (818) 506-1983 | antaeus.org