

ON STAGE & SCREEN

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Theater Review: Antaeus Theater's Hedda Gabler

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This is not your grandmother's *Hedda Gabler*. That much is clear only moments into Antaeus Theatre Company's current production, which opens in North Hollywood this weekend. This Hedda wears a chic jumpsuit, and with the removal of just a few dated details, Andrew Upton's more modern version of Henrik Ibsen's classic could easily take place today.



Photo by Karianne Flaathen

Directed here by Steven Robman, *Hedda Gabler* tells the story of the titular newlywed housewife who marries a reliable yet unremarkable man, moves into her dream house, and realizes everything she thought she wanted has made her utterly miserable. Armed with newfound boredom and a frightening mean streak, Hedda begins to pass the time by concocting manipulative plots designed to ruin the lives of those around her and help her regain control of her boring existence. The original was written in 1891, but this iteration takes place in the 1920s. Hedda is widely considered one of the great female antiheroines of drama, and the play's shocking ending is just as effective today as it presumably was in the Victorian era.

This production is notable in that it is Antaeus's last in their longtime North Hollywood home before they move to a brand new, upgraded facility in Glendale. All Antaeus productions are partner cast—the "Generals" cast performed on the night I attended and they were, as I have come to expect from Antaeus productions, fantastic. As Hedda, Jaimi Paige was appropriately icy and conniving, and did an compelling job portraying the character's increasingly frustrated mental state. Adrian LaTourelle was just the right amount of blustering and jovial as Hedda's slightly pathetic husband, Jørgen. Ann Noble was lovely as the timid Thea, and Daniel Blinkoff was commanding as Jørgen's academic rival, Ejert. Rounding out the cast were Amelia White as Jørgen's beloved Aunt Julle, Elizabeth Dennehy as the maid, Berte, and Tony Amendola as Judge Brack, an astute family friend who is the first to catch on to Hedda's schemes.



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One could probably spend weeks attempting to psychoanalyze Hedda, but in the end, her actions are completely unjustifiable to anyone not privy to the inner workings of her brain. This is not a character most will sympathize with, although her general situation is familiar. She quickly gets in over her head chasing her version of happily ever after, only to learn that life as a housewife and, possibly one day very soon, a mother is completely unstimulating, unfulfilling, and uninteresting to her. She could not be less suited to the life she has carefully constructed, and her first instinct is to turn to cruelty. Thea, who has known Hedda since their school days, drops in anecdotes from the past that hint Hedda has always been, frankly, a bit of a sociopath. While the story may on the surface tell of the dangers involved with oppressing women and restricting them to certain roles, Hedda is not your average woman. Much is made of her intelligence, her wit, and her cunning nature—the implication is that while her life may be plenty for some women, even someone like Thea, Hedda is simply too brilliant, too special, and too beautiful to be satisfied by such a mundane existence.

Having previously seen the 2009 Broadway revival, starring Mary-Louise Parker and Michael Cerveris, I found this more modern version significantly more palatable, enjoyable, and easy to follow. The scenes moved along at an engaging pace, with the tension ratcheting up appropriately as it built towards the inevitable and heavily foreshadowed conclusion. Ultimately, I still struggle with both the message and the point of Ibsen's work. While it is easy to look at Hedda and understand all the reasons her behavior is wrong, there is nothing



Photo by Karianne Flaathen

to really learn from her. In many ways, the moral of the story seems to be that, as they say in a certain oft-quoted current musical, we will never be satisfied. Hedda is not the only character who struggles with this—Jørgen will never feel confident in his talent or his place in the academic world, Thea leaves an unhappy marriage for a relationship that is ultimately even more doomed, and Ejert, while successful on paper in all of the ways Jørgen longs to be, battles his own demons. A beautiful home full of beautiful furniture does not necessarily contain happy people, and following the path society has seemingly laid out for us is often not the answer. While many human beings struggle with wanting what they can't have, most thankfully do not react as extremely as Hedda does. If they did...the world would be a more dangerous place than it already is.

Hedda Gabler runs at Antaeus through July 17 with performances Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings, as well as Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Tickets range from \$30-34. For information on both casts and to purchase tickets, please visit www.Antaeus.org (<http://www.Antaeus.org>).

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