

THE LITTLE FOXES



Photo by Geoffrey Wade

Antaeus Theatre Company

Timely, much?

In Antaeus Theatre's gorgeously appointed revival of the too-long overlooked 1939 masterpiece *The Little Foxes*, one of the greatest works written by the also too-long overlooked Lillian Hellman, the great playwright's observation, so much of it dredged up from her own personal experience, is even more of a warning than ever before in the world in which we live today.

As the Hubbard family's long-suffering maid and former slave Addie (Judy Louise Johnson) observes watching the events of the period drama beyond her control unfold around her, "There are people who ate the earth... and there are people who sat around and watched them eat it." Could this possibly be more of an urgent message than it is right now, some 80 years later, as boldly-hewn greed and a race for power "trump" any possible societal civility as our poor bruised country gears for the most important midterm election in our long and storied history?

Suggested by her friend Dorothy Parker, Hellman's title was lifted from "The Song of Solomon" in the King James version of the Bible: "Take us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes." See, the Hubbards, simply put, are total shits—and there's no way any little fox or any other living creature would not be in grave danger while trying to survive their sugar-coated Southern charms hiding their dastardly agenda lurching just under their fine ports and

voluminous lace. These people, quickly soaring to elitist fatcat status at the expense of all others in the post-war reconstructionist era of the Deep South, eat their grapes by the fistful.

Set in a small town in Alabama at the turn of the 20th-century, it doesn't take long to realize that, although it's said blood is thicker than water, when it comes to money and social position, these people would cut one another's throats in a heartbeat—and in the course of the play's three quickly-moving acts, they practically do.

LA theatrical royalty Deborah Puette leads the Hubbard pack as Regina Hubbard Giddens, she possessed of the sharpest of knives. Regina remains one of the juiciest and most female coveted roles into which any eager actor would love to sink their canines. Originated on Broadway by Tallulah Bankhead and in William Wyler's 1941 film version by Bette Davis, Puette brings something new and ominous to the task, a less concealed coldness and nastiness that makes the character even more frightening than ever.

As her equally ruthless brother Oscar, Rob Nagle, who is quickly becoming the go-to resident Simon Lagree for any play produced in LA over the last few years, is once again so delightfully creepy he could almost twirl a handlebar moustache and get away with it, while Mike McShane holds his own splendidly working against the formidable Puette and Nagle as the third Hubbard sibling Ben. As this horrific triumvirate, each of whom would bury anybody in their path while careening forward on their breakneck quest for wealth, these three powerful actors should win one special collective award for performance, bouncing off one another with a palpable electricity and a creative bravery seldom seen even when assaying the senior members of the Hubbard clan.

As with anything produced by Antaeus, this revival is stunningly appointed, with a gloriously evocative set by John Iocovelli and incredibly rich costuming designed by Terri A. Lewis, who singlehandedly built all of Puette's gowns especially for this production. Of course, none of this could possibly work without the uncanny eye of director Cameron Watson, who leads a stellar supporting cast to conjure the Hubbards' home and lifestyle—and perfumed evil-doing—with consummate skill.

Not that anyone else in this cast is off somewhere hiding amongst the magnolia blossoms; this is truly a dream ensemble for any director to mold and polish. Calvin Picou is wonderfully unlikable as Oscar's dimwitted disappointment of a son Leo, the only person here unable to hide his well-bred roguery, while both Johnson and William L. Warren are perfect as the family's stomped-upon servants bullied into submission.

John DeMita and Kristin Couture are excellent as Regina's badly manipulated husband and daughter, while Timothy Adam Venable takes the brief and rather unchallenging role of Chicago industrialist William Marshall and makes it his own. And last but hardly least, as Oscar's timid and abused alcoholic wife Birdie, Jocelyn Towne gives a *tour de force* performance, particularly moving near the end when she confesses what a nightmare her life has been in a warning to her niece not to let the same fate befall her.

Beyond all the world-class Antaeusian *accoutrement* delivered in this smart and sumptuous production, what lingers the most after the final curtain descends is the classic script by Hellman, who so clearly understood the Southern mentality and, despite the political incorrectness of exposing it, more importantly saw the dangers of not calling it out. The playwright spent half her childhood at her two maiden aunts' boarding house in New Orleans—in a room where I have myself have stayed during one excursion there where I hoped some of her genius would rub off on me—and the other half with her mother's wealthy family in New York.

Hellman, once heralded as our greatest female playwright before ironically being blacklisted and basically buried by Joseph McCarthy and his savagely destructive committee, was determined in her career to chronicle her family's whispered tales of the death of the Gilded Age and the advent of the Progressive Era, as well as the explosion of industrialization, urbanization, and freemarket capitalism. These issues were all too familiar to her, to the point where she approached her Aunt Florence at intermission when *The Little Foxes* first debuted on Broadway and asked, "Well, do you recognize your relatives?"

Still, just as Chekhov, Ibsen, and O'Neill before her tried so valiantly to depict how monumentally we as a species continuously mess things up for ourselves, nothing ever seems to result from their cautionary admonitions. At one point, Cal (Williams) talks to Oscar about his boss' passion for hunting, commenting that he bet he shot enough bobcats and squirrels to give "every n****r in town a Jesus party." Oscar, with a daggered look from Mr. Nagle that could wither a rose in bloom, immediately snaps back, "Cal, if I catch a n****r in this town goin' shootin', you know what's gonna happen." Beyond the tender grapes they grumbled were spoiling the vines back then, strange fruit still swung from Southern trees on a regular basis in 1900.

In the same week *The Little Foxes* debuted at Antaeus, a beautiful friend and neighbor walking down the street here in Hollywood was twice called that same odious "n"-word in two separate random incidents—in Hollywood, folks, not Alabama, not Kentucky. In Hollywood, California.

We all know who has emboldened this kind of vile behavior in our country today and the actions and beliefs of this "leader" of the free world could make the horrible Hubbards look like members of the Von Trapp family. Hellman and her contemporaries warned us so long ago, but who would have ever thought such feelings would belch out into the open after the 2016 election.

See *The Little Foxes* and be amazed, be entertained, be forewarned, but above all, damn it, although I may be preaching to the choir here, let it inspire you to cast your vote for the return of decency and compassion on Nov. 6 or I'm afraid America will never, ever be the same. Listen to the words of the Hubbards' wise servant Addie: Don't sit around and helplessly watch the earth be eaten around us.

THROUGH DEC. 10: Antaeus Theatre Company, 110 E. Broadway, Glendale. 818.506.1983 or www.Antaeus.org

DEAR EVAN HANSEN



Photo by Matthew Murphy