

# LA STAGE TIMES

## FEATURES

### Translaptation, Anyone? Stangl Returns to Antaeus for *The Liar*

by Dale Reynolds | October 9, 2013



Nicholas D'Agosto, Kate Maher and Gigi Bermingham from the "Tangerines" cast of "The Liar." Photo by Geoffrey Wade.

Call it a “[translaptation](#).” That’s a term [David Ives](#) uses for his comedy *The Liar*, opening this week at [Antaeus Company](#). It’s a translation *and* an adaptation of [Pierre Corneille’s](#) 1643 comedy *Le Menteur*, directed by the veteran Casey Stangl.

For Stangl, it’s her second go-round with Antaeus after helming the final show in the 2011 season, [Peace in Our Time](#) — Noel Coward’s little-known drama about a Nazi takeover of Great Britain. That staging won [an Ovation Award](#) last year for best production in an intimate theater and an [LA Weekly award](#) for best revival of a 20th- or 21st-century work.

“We are thrilled to have Casey back at Antaeus after such a wonderful collaboration,” says Antaeus co-artistic director (and cast member) [Rob Nagle](#), “and it’s a great way to launch into the coming year with her at the helm of a play as lively and fun as *The Liar*.”

Nagle also expresses excitement over Antaeus’ recent Ovation nomination for best season.



Casey Stangl

“Antaeus has faced some challenges in the last several years, but the fight has been worth it and we’re happy to feel like we’re creatively thriving.”

Stangl agrees that the season nomination is “well-deserved. I like the way Antaeus is finding new ways of reinterpreting the classics. Last year’s *The Crucible* [directed by Armin Shimerman and Geoffrey Wade] found non-traditional ways of telling the story that were exciting.”

“Reading Corneille in French,” Stangl says, “is slightly better than some of the more stilted translations out there.” Stangl directed *The Illusion*, Tony Kushner’s adaptation of Corneille’s *L’Illusion Comique* at *A Noise Within* in 2012. “Corneille has so many interesting ideas and philosophy in his work. This adaptation by Ives captures the essential spirit of the plays.”

The story is about a young visitor to Paris, one Dorante, who courts two women, confusing them with each other. He’s forced to tell one damned lie after

another to get out of his predicament. Dorante takes on a wily (is there any other kind?) servant, Cliton, who helps him get out of his scrapes.

Reviewing the premiere of Ives’ 2010 translation/adaptation by the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington DC, Washington Post critic Peter Marks [wrote](#), “Think of the evening as 17th-century Parisian stand-up, a night at L’Improv.”

Antaeus has become renowned for double-casting all its plays, due to the fact that many of its members work often in the TV/movies industry. Stangl cast both Nagle and Brian Slaten as the two Clitons. Using two casts is “both a great challenge and an opportunity for the company to approach the creation of character and a play holistically with the actors seeing, as it were, themselves on stage,” Stangl says.



Ann Noble and Jules Willcox of the “Cherries” cast, Kate Maher and Joanna Strapp of the “Tangerines”

After she directed *Peace in Our Time*, Stangl was approached about directing *The Liar*. She had read not only *The Liar* but also Ives’ translations *The School for Lies* (from Molière’s *The Misanthrope*), *The Heir Apparent* (from Jean-Francois Regnard’s *Le Légataire Universel*) and *A Flea in Her Ear* (the customary English title of Feydeau’s *La Puce à l’Oreille*).

Ives also adapted an early Mark Twain comedy, *Is He Dead?*, which

played at International City Theatre in 2009 and in a Coeurage Theatre production at last year’s

Hollywood Fringe Festival. Next spring, Stangl will direct Ives' *Venus in Fur*, the most produced play at nonprofit theaters in the 2013/14 season, at San Francisco's [American Conservatory Theater](#). It garnered Nina Arianda a Tony Award for the 2011 Broadway production. Says Stangl of Ives, "I truly admire his deliciousness in language and how that language defines us."

Stangl "never considered myself to be a classical theater maven," she says. But she appreciates that "clearly there is a built-in audience" for classics. "Bill Rauch at the [Oregon Shakespeare Festival](#) is delivering new takes — sorely needed. He is willing to go the whole 'non-traditional' casting route with racial and gender reversals." And the OSF's productions pack its three theaters in Ashland.

"The better companies around the country," Stangl adds, "are keeping the vitality of theater alive, especially when they tap into some essential qualities. Minneapolis' [Guthrie Theater](#) is leading the way, too. A Noise Within and Antaeus are successful because they have a standard of how language works.



Rob Nagle and Graham Hamilton (from both casts)

"*The Liar* has a contemporary feel to the adaptation, which is a challenge, as the audience must see it as real and connect to it emotionally. That demands a precision in the language. If the words cannot be delivered well, it loses its validity, so while it's tough to keep the talent pool open, the verbal rigor must be there from the actor."

For Stangl, the play demands another challenge as performers must deliver two things at the same

time: to be grounded in reality, but not in naturalism. "Heightened-language plays are inherently theatrical, with a presentational quality, as well as maintaining reality for full credibility. When it's successful, it's invigorating for the audience."

In casting *The Liar*, "because so many of [the Antaeus members] are working all the time, some of my choices were just unavailable. However, I like that when they choose their plays, they wisely think about who's available to do it."

Stangl is extremely careful in dissecting the notion of non-traditional casting. "I like it when it adds a little bit of flavor, but it must be within the context of the play. Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* [staged by Antaeus last season] had a theatricalized feel, which gave them permission to swap out gender and racial roles. [But] it needs to be accurate — looking at the power dynamics, for example, when the sexes are reversed." She feels that with the classics, with its naturally heightened language, the audience will accept a different world view more readily than with a contemporary play.

After *The Liar*, Stangl will be working with [Ensemble Galilei](#), a musical group with a Celtic/folk sound, using multi-media, actors-with-text, music and loose narratives, in *First Person Seeing America*. "We are working on tweaking it a bit to re-shape the narrative, and I'll fly to Washington,

DC to put it all together in their mid-sized performance space next week. [Antaeus Company member] [Lily Knight](#) brought me into the project, and she and Rob Nagle will be in it.” A year ago, Ensemble Galilei performed a previous version of *First Person Seeing America* with Knight and Bill Pullman at [Broad Stage](#).



Nicholas D'Agosto and Bo Foxworth of the  
“Tangerines”

She is also scheduled to direct a Theatre for Young Audiences [production of \*James and the Giant Peach\*](#) at South Coast Repertory next February, her fourth such TYA production with SCR. And next June she'll return to Antaeus to stage the premiere of Kenneth Cavander's *The Curse of Oedipus*.

“I love language and what words can do,” Stangl says, just as she values “story and narrative and emotion. The classics give us a direct connection to the parts of the human condition that have been with us throughout history.”

Stangl started out as a dancer/choreographer, so “movement is meaning” to her. “I prefer my theater to be, well, theatrical, and less filmic — the more TV it's like, the less successful it is for me, and I'm a huge TV fan.” Theater, she says, should play to its own strengths: “joyous and theatrical, big stakes or concepts, with elevated words. I love it when it walks that tightrope between comedy and tragedy. I want theater to lighten and to expose, but to never lose the

line to emotions. To that end, my favorite works are the Greeks — the primal concerns of humanity as mankind struggles with the big ideas. It's as easy to do Greek theater badly as it's hard to do well. As a culture, we aren't trained to listen anymore...aural theater demands quality oral work.”

That applies to Ives as well as to the Greeks. In the preface to [a published version of \*The Liar\*](#), he quotes what 18th Century poet Samuel Johnson said about translating poetry: “The way to judge the merit of a translation is to be its effect as an English poem,” not just a foreign one.

For Ives, “I submit that the same principle applies to plays, especially old ones. In fact, for my money only playwrights should translate plays because the point is not to carry over sentences from one language to another, but to produce a credible, speakable, playable, producible play for today, no matter what's in the original. It seems to me that that's the only way a translated play can ever have what every good play has to have: a voice.”

In Ives' opinion, Corneille's *Le Menteur* “revolutionized the idea of what French comedy could be.

Instead of the Italian-style farce that had previously dominated the stage, Corneille's comedies aimed at depicting the foibles of the upper class with up-to-the-minute accuracy. This led to a higher style of language and plotting, and to a sense of contemporary relevance. His stylish verse brought comedy into a parallel, rather than inferior, relationship to tragedy.”

***The Liar*, Antaeus Theatre Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood 91601.  
Opens October 10 and 11 (different casts). Thu-Fri 8 pm, Sat 2 pm and 8 pm, Sun 2 pm.**