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STEVEN STANLEY'S STAGESCENELA.COM: SPOTLIGHTING THE BEST IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA THEATER

THE LIAR

STAGEsceneLA WOW!

Silliness has rarely been cleverer or cleverness sillier than in David Ives' translation/adaptation of Pierre Corneille's 1644 comedy *The Liar*, The Antaeus Company's end-of-season offering and quite possibly the classical theater masters' frothiest romp ever.



Ives (*All In The Timing*, *Venus In*

Fur) sticks close to Corneille's farcical plot, preserving the original's rhyming-couplet style, though it's clear from the get-go (even the pre-show announcements are in iambic pentameter rhymes) that Ives' "translaptation" (the word coinage is his) will take considerable liberties when converting 17th-Century French to 21st Century English.

Rhyming word-plays like "You may be a bivalve, but you're my valve," or "Champs Elysees, my friend, lies that-a-way, unless the Lou-vre has mou-vred since yesterday" will give you some idea of just how silly and clever is Ives' contemporary-flavored take on Corneille's three-and-a-half century-old French soufflé.

Our pre-show announcer Cliton has no sooner exhorted us to "with your iPods please, turn off your brain" and warned us that "tonight our actors will be speaking verse" than he gets himself hired as manservant to recent law-school grad (and inveterate liar) Dorante.

(Cliton's pitch? "I don't eat much. Check my diameter. I cook, I clean, I speak pentameter.")

And before you know it, the duo have made the acquaintance of curvaceous best friends Clarice and Lucrece.



Immediately taken with Clarice,

Dorante impresses the raven-haired beauty with tales of his military bravery ("The siege of Zinkendorf, up on the walls, I took not one but ten Teutonic balls."), then convinces the object of his infatuation that he's been in love with her since first she caught his eye six months ago.

Since none of this is true, Dorante has no recourse but to ask Cliton to ascertain the identity of his lady fair, the servant returning with the news that, according to lady's maid Isabelle, the greater beauty is not Clarice but cute but geeky, bespectacled Lucrece.

It's no wonder, therefore, that Dorante objects to his father Geronte's insistence that *Clarice* would make his son a perfect bride, our hero believing that Lucrece the is the one his father intends for him to marry.

And so Dorante invents a secret bride in distant Poitiers, news which provides Geronte with some temporary comfort in his son's supposed wedded bliss but doesn't solve our hero's problems.



Further complicating matters (as if they needed further complications) is the fact that Clarice is already secretly engaged to Dorante's best friend Alcippe, who to Clarice's justifiable dismay seems in no hurry to get married.

And that's just the start to two acts of ever more hilarious lies, one outrageous rhyming couplet after another (Isabelle tells Cliton in words ready for Match.com, "I like Italian food and English beer, stuffed animals, long walks, Chanel perfume. Here's my address and the key to my room."), and more than one case of mistaken identity. (It just so happens that saucy Isabelle's identical twin sister is grumpy fellow maid Sabine.)

With Casey Stangl assuredly in the director's seat, two entirely different (and equally brilliant) casts alternate in bringing Pierre Corneille a la David Ives to effervescent life, with a flair for both language and physical comedy. (Stangl gives us a running "handshake" gag that's particularly brilliant.)

All Antaeus productions are double cast (they call it "partner casting"), the better to allow its troupe of working actors to take performances off for higher-paying film, TV, and Equity theater gigs, and *The Liar* is no exception.



The "Cherries" (Joe Delafield, Jeff Thomas Gardner, Graham Hamilton, Ann Noble, Robert Pine, Brian Slaten, Karen Malina White, and Jules Willcox) alternate Saturday/Sunday performances with the "Tangerines" (Gigi Bermingham, Nicholas D'Agosto, Bo Foxworth, Jonathon Lamer, Kate Maher, Rob Nagle, Joanna Strapp, and Peter Van Norden), with members of each cast combined in diverse variations for Thursday and Friday "Pomegranate" mixes.

Seeing both Cherries and Tangerines turns out to be the rare case where separate is indeed equal, and makes a return visit a must for lovers of great acting—which is what these Antaeans invariably deliver.

Similarly terrific performances can come from two actors with quite different looks, coloring, and height. (Both D'Agosto and Hamilton give Dorante a just-right combination of handsome, debonair sexy, and swashbuckling.) Physically dissimilar actors can give their shared role quite different flavors. (Nagle's Cliton is more "clueless" than Slaten's more simply naive incarnation, and Noble's Lucrece is bookish where Strapp's comes across nerdish.)



Sometimes differences can make for two *radically* different takes on the same role. (Though both Delafield and Foxworth give us a goth-rock Alcippe, Delafield plays him as a lovestruck poet whereas Foxworth gives us an older, wilder Alcippe who's a master of the slow burn.) Non-traditional casting can make for interesting partnerships. (Bermingham is more successful at distinguishing between saucy Isabelle and grumpy Sabine, but having African-American White in the two roles has its own allure.) And it can be fascinating when different actors make different "choices." (Pine's softer, gentler Geronte greets the discovery of his son's lying ways with sadness where Van Norden's nutty powerhouse reacts with anger.)



And then there are those evenings or afternoons when an actor steps in for another and finds him or herself playing opposite entirely new scene partners. Both Maher and Willcox are tall, dark beauties and perfect casting for Clarice, however I saw Willcox twice, the first time in scenes with a brand-new best friend, suitor, and jealous lover. "Tangerine" Lamer similarly took over for "Cherry" Gardner as Philiste, making the suave most of the play's smallest, most underwritten role. (My best guess is that anyone who saw Maher or Gardner on Friday or Saturday was as impressed by their work as I was with Willcox's and Lamer's on Thursday and Sunday.)

Since *The Liar's* 2010 World Premiere by Washington D.C.'s Shakespeare Theater Company, productions from The Berkshires to Chicago to Santa Barbara have had one thing in common—a traditional period design with plenty of bustles and ruffles and leggings and lace and great big chapeaux in vivid Technicolor hues.

At Antaeus, Stangl and her crackerjack team of designers take a diametrically different approach, and one that makes great sense considering just how contemporary a sensibility Ives gives Corneille's words.



Angela Balogh Callin costumes everyone in black, the women in sexy bustiers and taffeta minis, the men in gothic black as well, though equally striking; scenic designer Keith Mitchell might well have constructed his terrific multilevel set from a gigantic erector set; properties designer Adam Meyer has come up with one ingenious prop after another; and all of the above is bathed in iridescent, endlessly varied hues by lighting designer Francois-Pierre Couture. Sound designer Peter Bayne's delightfully quirky original compositions make for the perfect musical soundtrack to all this onstage madness.

Lara E. Nall is production stage manager. Assistant stage manager-wardrobe mistress Kristin Weber does delightful double duty each time she comes on (in costume) to help with scene changes. R. Scott Thompson is master electrician-technical director, Ken Merckx takes charge of weaponry, Shannon Kennedy of scenic paint, and Caitly Hawksley of wigs. Kaitlin Kelly and Rachel Berney Needleman are assistant directors and Maria Uribe assistant costume designer.

Antaeus Company artists have been funny before, last year's *You Can't Take It With You* a perfect case in point, but I'll bet none of them have garnered more laughs per line than Pierre Corneille and David Ives give them in *The Liar*. I could tell you that Antaeus' latest is far from the funniest show in town, but I'd be lying through my teeth, and nowhere near as skillfully as *Dorante* and the band of zanies who bring this hitherto largely forgotten French classic to life upon the wicked stage.

The Antaeus Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Through December 2. Thursdays and Fridays at 8:00. Saturdays at 2:00 and 8:00. Sundays at 2:00. All roles are double cast. See website for casts and schedules. Reservations: 818 506-1983
www.Antaeus.org

—Steven Stanley
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Photos: Geoffrey Wade