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## Cousin Bette a Triumph for Antaeus Company

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Tuesday, March 2, 2010; Posted: 07:03 AM - by [Don Griwara](#)

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Cousin Bette based on the novel by Honore de Balzac written for the stage by Jeffrey Hatcher directed by Jeanie Hackett Antaeus Company @ Deaf West Theatre in NoHo through March 21

Known as the father of realism in the 19th century, novelist Honore de Balzac captured French society exactly as he saw it: warts and all. After the fall of Napoleon in 1815, the French upper class were, to say the least, greedy and disloyal capitalists who lived only for sexual favors and money. Such is the background for Cousin Bette. Bette is the poor relation of the Fischer family and serves as the mouthpiece for playwright Hatcher as she narrates the play and tells the story of how her unbearably ruthless relations married into the wealthy Hulot family and made life - well, unbearable for her. The moral of the story, is, of course, when you try to vengefully manipulate something infinitely more powerful than yourself, matching evil for evil, you are doomed to misery and failure. Along the way, though, Bette's adventures, or better labeled misadventures, provide for a splendid entertainment, especially in Hatcher's brilliantly audacious adaptation and under the economically ingenious staging of Jeanie Hackett. The Antaeus Company ensemble offers a devilishly dark and venomous Cousin Bette to relish. I haven't had such fun since Nicholas Nickleby.

On the night I attended there were a mix of actors from both the Fischer and Hulot casts, with Alicia Wollerton supreme as Cousin Bette. What a bravura performance! Wollerton's passion runs as deep as a river and she drives her plan to its climax with so much unwavering strength, guts and determination, that the audience stays on her side. Others in the ensemble, some sharing two or more roles, are evenly outstanding. John Prosky is deliciously revolting as Hector Hulot, as are Micheal McShane as the disgusting perfume magnate Crevel and Paul Willson as Old Fischer. Dana Green brings an awkward sense of sincerity and purity to the whorish Valerie Marneffe and Laura Wernette is just right as the beautiful Adeline. David St. Louis is a tower of power as the villainous Demontes and kudos as well to Joseph Ruskin, Jeremy Shouldis, Rebecca Mozo, Katherine Leigh and last but hardly least, Daniel Bass as Wenceslas Steinbock, the struggling artist whose affections get tossed and kicked back and forth more arduously than a football between opposing teams.

This is a production to savor from top to bottom. Presented in three acts and coming in at just about three hours, there is not one monotonous moment. I was engrossed from start to finish. This is richly entertaining classical theatre at its best. Bravo, bravo, bravo to the Antaeus Company!

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Don Grigware is an Ovation nominated actor and writer whose contributions to theatre through the years have included 6 years as theatre editor of NoHoLA, a contributor to LA Stage magazine and currently on his own website: [www.grigwaretalkstheatre.com](#)

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