



Jeanie Hackett Directs the Vast Canvas of Cousin Bette

FEATURES by [Deborah Behrens](#) | January 21, 2010

Cousin Bette, presented by The Antaeus Company, Opens Jan. 30; plays Thurs.-Sat., 7:30 pm; Sun., 4 pm; through March 21. Tickets: A\$30-\$34. Previews Sat., Jan. 23 at 8 pm; Sun, Jan. 24 at 4 pm; Tues. Jan. 26-Fri. Jan. 29 at 7:30 pm. Previews: \$20. Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood; 818.506.1983 or antaeus.org.

No one knows better the meaning of the adage, “Be careful what you wish for, lest you get it,” than Jeanie Hackett.

When the Antaeus Company Artistic Director asked the Center Theatre Group to forward any scripts they thought might work for her classics-focused North Hollywood theater ensemble, she had no idea it would lead to her directorial debut tackling a world premiere production of Cousin Bette, Jeffrey Hatcher’s stage adaptation of Honoré de Balzac’s novel featuring two alternating casts of 16 actors plus eight understudies playing 25 characters for Antaeus’ inaugural full season opener.

“This was about four years ago,” explains Hackett over dinner at the Eclectic Café down the block from the group’s current Deaf West Theatre home on Lankershim Boulevard. “It was at a meeting Michael Ritchie had called for small theatres. How can CTG help us besides putting a play on the main stage? CTG has helped Antaeus a lot with development and our growth as a business. I said to Pier Carlo Talenti, their literary manager, we’re interested in adaptations of classics or new plays that have a period theme or language. A couple months later he sent me Cousin Bette. Pier said, ‘We’re not going to do this. It’s actually too big for us but we thought it would be a good project for Antaeus.’ And I thought, oh my god, it’s too big for Center Theatre Group and they’re sending it to us? This is really funny.”

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Especially given an economic climate that has repurposed the industry term "under five" to connote the unspoken character count required for getting a stage production mounted.

"It's only in small theatres that don't pay actors that you can do big cast plays. Most of the mid-sized Equity theatre companies like the Colony are forced down in this economy to two, three or four character plays. *Cousin Bette* is a big canvas. It allows a lot of life to be portrayed. I think that's what Balzac did so well."

The play is based upon Balzac's sprawling 1846 novel *La Cousine Bette*, considered to be the French author's last great work. Set in mid-19th century Paris, it tells the story of a poor relation spinster who plots the downfall of her much wealthier extended family with the help of a beautiful, unhappy courtesan. Exactly the kind of juicy, historical tale playwright and screenwriter Jeffery Hatcher likes to mold into theatrical fare.



Jeffrey Hatcher

"The thing that first appealed to me about it was the 'I'm going to wipe out my family' plot," admits Hatcher in the Deaf West lobby during an early January visit for rehearsals and rewrites. "That's just a solid plot idea. 'I will destroy them all.' And I had seen it as a Masterpiece Theatre a thousand years ago with Margaret Tyzak and Helen Mirren, which I thought was pretty great. It was that very strange time in the late '60s, early '70s where everyone was very stage bound. Sometimes in adaptation, it's nice to see what someone else has done with something because I know the narrative bones of it transfer from literature to some form of drama."

It's an arena Hatcher knows well. The author of more than 50 plays and, according to *The Wicked Stage* blog, the ninth most produced playwright in 2009, he has adapted such works as Henry James' *The Turn of Mind*

biography, the most produced playwright in 2007, he has adapted such works as Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, Mitch Albom's *Tuesday's With Morrie* (co-writer), Anouilh's *Leocadia: To Fool the Eye*, Herman Melville's *Pierre*, George Bernard Shaw's *An Unsocial Socialist* into *Smash*, Edgar Allan Poe stories into *Murder by Poe*, Kaufman and Hart's *The Fabulous Invalid* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. His screenplays include *Stage Beauty* (adapted from his play *Compleat Female Stage Beauty*), *Casanova* and *The Duchess*. Among his original plays recently seen by LA audiences include *A Picasso* at the Geffen Playhouse and *Ella* at Laguna Playhouse.

"It did strike me 30 years later that if Bette could talk to the audience that would really work," says Hatcher. "The whole *Richard III* thing. It was in my brain for years and years and then there finally was a gap in 2001 where I thought I'd go off and write. I do a lot of plays that have direct address. So much of this kind of playwriting is expository. If you have someone like Bette who can say, 'I'm your tour guide into this world and I will tell you who people are,' not only is it an efficient way to get through all that stuff but you get a relationship then between the character and the audience."

"I really feel like Jeffrey's written a remarkable play," says Hackett. "Finding the tone is so interesting. The play is so tricky. It's human, it's dark and violent and yet at the same time, it's funny, too. It has an unreliable narrator. In the beginning you think of course I'm on her team. But I don't know if you feel that way at the end."

Hatcher concurs. "Can we get to the point where we like Bette for a terribly long time even though she's doing terrible things, admittedly to bad people or idiots, and then start to creep the audience out? Then our relationship becomes stinky and unpleasant and clammy. The relationship with the audience is always the key thing with these direct address things. It can't simply be, here I'm telling you some stuff. There's got to be a dynamic between them. Even in *Richard III*, you should never feel, oh good, they killed him. At long last, his head's been cut off. Once you take a long ride with someone, it's not difficult to drop them off. It's difficult to drop them off and see them get hit by a truck."

Hackett hopes people come away with a sense of having had "a thrill ride. Bette does everything there is to do and she crosses the line. She is like *Richard III*. She goes further than we dare to go to get revenge on somebody, to love somebody, to get what we want. Maybe that's the attraction. How far can you go to get what you want? And when are you repulsed by it? And when do you admire it?"

Nike Doukas and Alice Wollerton are jointly playing the role of Bette on a two level set designed by Tom Buderwitz, clad in costumes by A. Jeffrey Schoenberg and lit by Leigh Allen with stage management by Leia Crawford. According to Hackett, Antaeus Company's double casting system, which began as a pragmatic

solution to maintaining actors with mercurial television and film schedules, has become an essential ensemble building technique.



“When you share a role with the person, you really have to sublimate your ego,” she emphasizes. “You realize there is more than one person who can play a part. The best pairs collaborate together. Can I steal this from you? You do it in your own self-interest because you want the part to go the way you want to go. But you also have to find a way to be really cooperative in a manner that makes it feel like everyone wins. Occasionally we have a couple that doesn’t do that and

they’re less good than the rest of the people in a company.”

Hackett admits when she first read the play, she loved it. Her inclination was to initiate the piece as an acting project for herself, which is a standard practice at Antaeus. Actor-initiated projects start as workshops and readings before potentially becoming full productions. *Cousin Bette* was slated to be workshopped as part of their ClassicsFest 2008 but when artistic advisory board member Jonathan Lynn had to bow out as director to helm a film, Hackett decided to take over his reins. After audiences flipped over the play and core patrons urged her to mount it, the actors asked Hackett to stay on with the project. Associate artist directors Anne Gee Byrd, Kitty Swink and Arye Gross agreed despite its lead position in a season featuring *King Lear*, ClassicsFest 2010 and Lillian Hellman’s *Autumn Garden*.

“If they had said this is the opening of our season and you really shouldn’t do this, I would’ve said fine,” she stresses. “It wasn’t like I felt I needed to do it, and this is a terrible thing to say, but I felt like I could do it best. I knew the play better than anybody. I knew the actors better than anybody. I knew how to work the double casting system. I would have a head start. And it was incredibly frightening for me to think about directing this play. I’ve been working on it a really long time trying to be as prepared as possible. Jonathan is now a mentor on the project as is Dan Sullivan, who are two great directors I can go to for advice.”

Other key advisers Hackett credits include noted dramaturge Christopher Breyer who worked alongside both her and playwright Hatcher to tighten the play into a workable three-hour evening with two intermissions, as well as Buderwitz and Allen who walked her through the art of creating a scenic environment and lighting it.

When asked what surprised her most about herself in running the room, Hackett admitted she thought she was going to be “a very touchy-feely, artsy-fartsy director. Instead I’ve been very technical. Halfway through this process I was bound and determined to get this thing blocked and staged and on its feet with a full run-through

because Jeffrey was re-writing new scenes all the time. I had to see the whole piece. I felt like the actors were thinking, hey when are we going to do the real work? I'm surprised at how technical I've been instead of Stanislavski-ish."

While *Cousin Bette* is her first major directing gig, Hackett brings considerable theatrical experience to the table. Besides being Antaeus' Artistic Director since 2004, she has served as Artistic Coordinator for its critically acclaimed productions of Chekhov x 4 and *Tonight at 8:30* by Noël Coward, produced the celebrated *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *Pera Palas* and *American Tales* as well as four festivals of classical plays. She has directed at LA's The Classical Theater Lab and with the Second Company at the Williamstown Theatre Festival. As an actress, Hackett has appeared on Broadway as Stella in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and in Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness* plus several seasons with the Williamstown Theatre Festival as well as other noted performances Off-Broadway, South Coast Rep, Geffen Playhouse and Pasadena Playhouse.



Hackett also heads the Antaeus Academy, a training program for rising professional actors, and is the author of two books on acting, *The Actor's Chekhov* and *Toward Mastery*, both based on the work of the late director and famed Williamstown Theatre Festival founder Nikos Psacharopoulos to whom she was engaged until his unexpected death following colon cancer surgery in 1989.

"He's my master influence," she confesses, softening at the mention of his name. "Everything I feel or know about theatre, I feel I learned through him. Nikos made a rehearsal room electric. He didn't just direct the play; he directed the world around him." She smiles. "I feel like he's with me right now as I'm directing this. I really do."

As someone who fought directors for most of her professional acting life, Hackett says she now more clearly sees her former behavior in others and how they make the rehearsal process unnecessarily difficult. "Now I feel my reason to be in the room as an actor or director is to create the kind of environment where everybody feels so relaxed they're free enough to do their best work. Whether they are taking my direction or not matters less than the atmosphere I've created that allows the creative process to spring forward in a silly, fun, playful and safe way. I feel I've changed as an actress to be the kind of director I would want."

Hackett admits the stakes for her leadership of *Cousin Bette* are pretty high. "If I stopped to think about it, it's like WTF am I doing? Why am I putting so much on the line for myself? I think it's best not to think about it.

I'm having so much fun in the room putting on a terrific play. The actors and I decided together I should do it. I'm just following the flow."

She knows people think she puts too much on her plate. "I feel like if you're running a theatre and if you are carefully stepping forward, you're never going to get anywhere. Anywhere! If you really want to grow, you have to take chances. You have to plan a season you don't know if you can really pay for. Now we have enough history of raising money I feel confident if we work our butts off, we can do this. The safe way would be to do one play and see what happens then.

"Sure I'm scared but what are you going to do? Not do something because you're scared? Nikos used to say, if you're going to fail, fail trying to be successful. Don't fail because you're too scared to be successful!"

Hackett laughs. "At least fail because you're trying to do it."

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