



Cousin Bette Moves with Force at Antaeus

BLOGS by [TylerMcClain](#) | March 24, 2010

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For a three-hour play about the destruction of an entire aristocratic Parisian family by their vengeful “poor relation,” and based on a 19th-century novel by Honore de Balzac of the same name, *Cousin Bette* (an Antaeus production, hosted by NoHo’s Deaf West Theater) is a hell of a lot of fun. It’s not that the source material is daunting or unenjoyable (truth be told I’m unfamiliar with the novel) but it is widely known for its pitch-black tone and has frequently been compared to *Othello* and *War and Peace*. Yikes, sounds pretty heavy for a Sunday afternoon.

I suppose it’s safe to say I entered the theater already feeling a bit alienated. I imagine it’s probably a familiar feeling for theatergoers: knowing beforehand the subject matter is already a substantial challenge for anyone, let alone some theater troupe you’re not familiar with and it’s three hours long and there are two intermissions and just... yikes, y’know?

Is this going to be a great afternoon of drama, or will it become long and uninteresting and leave me feeling

like a mummy in some ancient tomb? That might be a little hyperbolic for any stage work but (I think understandably) I felt a little apprehensive, a little weary.

Then the play started and before I knew it, I was three acts and two intermissions wiser, and I was left wanting more. The play thrives because of great acting, some thoughtful direction and because of consolidation. Cousin Bette's story has been trimmed here-and-there, and the ending is sped up maybe just a bit too quickly, but by-and-large, it works quite well. Every sacrifice from the source material was made for the betterment of the work.

The problem with adapting any piece of classic literature for the stage or screen is you are appropriating someone else's esteemed work; it's not just your reputation at stake but someone else's as well... and, in this case, that "someone else" is long dead and unable to comment one way or another on the final product. It's a risky move but Jeffrey Hatcher took the chance and has been rewarded in the form of a play that moves with force, riding high on Bette's long-brewing resentments. Actually, my parents might be disappointed to discover exactly how much I enjoyed watching the character wreck havoc and seek vengeance.

Though not revisionism, the play certainly alters my expectations for three-hour period drama; it's the sort of play I'd recommend to someone hesitant or weary of intense stage drama because it proves modern theater is fun, and it is exciting - affirmations that seem necessary for people new to drama.

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