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Reviving a Forgotten Miller Play

by DAVID MERMELSTEIN

LOS ANGELES -- IN the film and television empire of Southern California, with the largest talent pool of actors in the world, legitimate theater is by definition a supporting player. But between the extremes of the established regional stages and tiny theatrical groups struggling to survive are a number of surprising success stories. The Antaeus Company is one of these.

Formed in 1991 as a research and study group for classically trained actors who had strayed from the stage into film and television, Antaeus (the name derives from the mythical wrestler) has 70 members, 60 of whom are actors. The roster includes familiar faces, though many of the names are less well known. But regular theatergoers will doubtless recognize Douglas Sills, Lillian Garrett-Groag, Harry Groener and John Vickery, all of whom are members.

Though the group has mounted only a handful of plays in the last 10 years, its efforts have earned it a loyal following. And it is this audience that has helped the company's latest production, a revival of Arthur Miller's first commercially produced play, "The Man Who Had All the Luck," to extend its run twice. It is now scheduled to close on June 25. Critical comment has been favorable, and a notice in Time magazine generated the sort of buzz that most Los Angeles theaters only dream about.

M R. MILLER'S fablelike drama flopped when it opened on Broadway in 1944. The playwright himself calls it "a strange play, an abstraction." But the work has long struck Dan Fields, a director and producer, as ripe for revival. Mr. Fields was a young literary assistant at the Seattle Repertory Theater when he happened upon Mr. Miller's play 10 years ago. "I hadn't read anything like this from Miller before," Mr. Fields recalled, "and its themes spoke to my own life questions: does a man have control of his fate or not?"

Last year, on a visit to Los Angeles, he called an actor friend, Paul Gutrecht, who had recently joined Antaeus. Mr. Fields knew of the company and its reputation. While studying at U.C.L.A. in 1995, he had seen a well-received Antaeus production of Chekhov's "Wood Demon" at the Mark Taper Forum. Mr. Fields thought Mr. Gutrecht would be ideal for the lead role in Mr. Miller's play, that of a young man blessed beyond his, and everyone else's, comprehension.

Essentially allegorical, "The Man Who Had All the Luck" follows the progress of David Beeves as he makes his way through a mostly ordinary Depression-era life. But the rough spots in his path have an uncanny habit of disappearing. When his fiancée's father blocks David's marriage, a "lucky" automobile accident removes him from the scene. When the state decides to build a highway, it runs right past David's gas station. As others fail, he seemingly inexplicably prospers.

Mr. Miller, who has not seen the production, said by telephone from his home in Connecticut that the play deals with a universal concern: "Am I being watched or am I just a freewheeling atom in the universe?" The theme, he added, was not properly explored when the play had its debut. "They didn't know what to do with it in 1944," Mr. Miller said. "Frankly, neither did I. And the critics couldn't dig it. That's why it was

with it in 1977, Mr. Miller said. Frankly, neither did I. And the critics couldn't dig it. That's why it was basically discarded."

The play, directed by Mr. Fields, is being presented at a converted power station in the shadow of the old MGM lot in Culver City. But Antaeus is establishing a permanent home in North Hollywood, converting a warehouse into a 99-seat theater with a thrust stage. Dakin Matthews, the managing director of Antaeus, bought the property for \$850,000 and is leasing it to the company. He said the troupe might take up residence in what will be known as the New Place Studio Theater by the fall of next year. The move marks another addition to the NoHo Arts District, an area of commercial redevelopment that has the support of the city's business and arts communities.

Mr. Matthews gave credit to Mr. Gutrecht -- who did get the title role in "The Man Who Had All the Luck" -- for starting the process that has brought Antaeus its greatest success thus far. "None of us had heard of the script," Mr. Matthews said. "We felt it was an undiscovered classic. And one of the things we like to do here is unearth buried treasure."

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