

CRITIC'S PICK

Tonight at 8:30: Come the Wild

November 15, 2007

By Les Spindle

A delectable vaudeville ditty, "Has Anybody Seen My Ship?," provides an auspicious beginning for the four one-act plays in Part 2 of Antaeus Classical Ensemble's terrific resurrection of Noël Coward's seldom-revived play anthology. Like Part 1 (reviewed in our Nov. 8 issue), Part 2 is double-cast, and the combinations of actors vary.

Red Peppers, directed by Stefan Novinski, is a sidesplitting backstage farce about a bickering performing couple (JD Cullum and Gigi Bermingham, alternating with John Prosky and Rhonda Aldrich) appearing in a cheesy music hall. The music director (Philip Proctor) is a lush, the house manager (Robert Pine, Ned Schmidtke) an insufferable clod, and the haughty, over-the-hill star (Angela Paton, Anne Gee Byrd) grumbles about the backstage altercations. The alternating pairs of actors who play the combative showbiz couple parlay the "Has Anybody Seen My Ship?" routine into a gleeful and fascinating glimpse at the historic music-hall form. The casts grace the manic comic shenanigans with scintillating wit and high style.

Fumed Oak, directed by Robert Goldsby, deftly mixes raucous humor and dark undertones. It's set in a hellish middle-class home, in which the beleaguered patriarch (Josh Clark) drops a bombshell on his callous wife (Laura Wernette, Kitty Swink), whiny daughter (Emily Eiden, Katy Tyszkiewicz), and battle-ax mother-in-law (Paton, Lynn Milgrim). Clark is brilliant at slowly yet methodically revealing the depth of his character, and the actors playing his insufferable family members expertly navigate the shifting tones in this stunning piece.

Still Life, directed by Stephanie Shroyer, is another literate seriocomedy. It feels like a forerunner to William Inge's 1955 classic *Bus Stop*. Tentative romances flourish in the refreshment room of a commuter train station, leading to a nifty surprise ending. In the primary love story, a doctor (Mirron Willis, John Prosky) and a married woman (Shannon Holt, Alicia Wollerton) meet and embark on an affair. The magnificent Holt presents an edgier depiction of the reluctant unfaithful wife, though Wollerton's more subdued approach is also effective. Willis and Prosky excel as the infatuated physician. Byrd, Clark, Bill Brochtrup, and Angela Goethals are among the standouts in choice supporting roles.

Family Album, directed by Brendon Fox, is a sardonic comedy about relatives gathering after the death of their less-than-beloved patriarch. Spirited songs intermittently punctuate the action. The two alternating ensemble casts are equally fine.

Enhancing this lovely production are stylish period-specific design elements and the deft music direction of Matt Goldsby. Antaeus does itself proud with this artful and thoroughly captivating repertory series.

Presented by the Antaeus Classical Theatre Ensemble at the Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood.

Repertory schedule. Nov. 10-Dec. 23.

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