

## Current Coward in California: An Interview with Jeanie Hackett

NCS member Jeanie Hackett is co-Artistic Director of The Antaeus Company in North Hollywood, California. Antaeus recently completed a highly-successful run of *Tonight at 8:30* [see Ken Starrett's article in the February 2008 issue of Home Chat.] On March 1-2, [ANTAEUS](#) produced a benefit performance for Antaeus, which featured *Shadow Play*, *Ways and Means*, and the U. S. premiere of *The Better Half* [see Barbara Longford's article on *The Better Half* in the December 2007 issue of Home Chat.] Coward Society member Kathy Williams interviewed Jeanie on January 25<sup>th</sup> about The Antaeus Company productions and her interest in Coward.

When and how did you become interested in Noel Coward?

I went to acting school at NYU [New York University], and my initial experiences as an actress were at the Williamstown Theatre Festival. It was through my training and the work at Williamstown that I first encountered almost all the major Coward plays, starting with *Nude with Violin*. Director Nikos Psacharopoulos was really a wonderful director of Coward's [plays], so I fell in love with Coward as a young actress. I was lucky enough to play Joanna in *Present Laughter* at the [PASADENA](#) Playhouse.

This was The Antaeus Company's first production at the Deaf West Theatre. What inspired you to produce Coward's work, in particular, *Tonight at 8:30*?

For Antaeus, most of 2007 was more about the [business] aspects of running a theatre than the creative aspects. We had to [RAISE MONEY, WE HAD TO](#) find and move to an interim space. And all of our wonderful company members, who are really well-known for television and film [WORK](#), who come in and volunteer here, work so hard for us. We had a big fund raiser last year; we raised five times more money than in any previous year, and the whole company worked on that. We needed a party, and we wanted to show off our company. Also, we wanted a contrast to our previous productions, such as Brecht and Chekhov. Coward just seemed the ideal, best way to introduce our audience to our brand new space.

You had six directors for *Tonight at 8:30*. How did you get them to come together in their vision of the plays?

One of our biggest concerns was: how can we make this not a series of one-acts, but actually something that flows as a production? So, one of the things I was most proud of was that a lot of the reviews mentioned the cohesiveness of the whole production – it did not look like one director took one play in this direction and another director took a play in another direction. The production really had a sort of harmony and symmetry: and that's what an ensemble company does. I was the artistic overseer for all the plays; I did all the transitions between things so there was one person looking at the whole shape of things. I got to work with six wonderful directors, and they very graciously accepted my input. I hope that I helped to guide the show stylistically as well.

Antaeus received critical acclaim for *Tonight at 8:30*. How was the audience reception ... and how was your box office?

We had people who had come to Part I and Part II, and after they saw both parts, they came back to see both parts again with a different cast. ([Antaeus has a policy of double-casting every show we do.](#)) People who saw all four casts were sending emails about how fun it was to see different actors in the roles, and how the plays changed and how different nuances came out with different actors. Audiences really enjoyed

seeing not just two Noel Coward evenings, but four of them.

Our press didn't hit until the week after our second opening, at which point our audience size kept going up and up from 70% 'til we played to 103% capacity — we oversold! And we did six shows a week. Normally, we only do four shows a week. Had we done only four shows a week, we would have been completely sold out every single night.

Your cast included members of the Antaeus ensemble as well as guest performers. They have a range of backgrounds including regional theatre, Broadway, movies, television, and standup comedy. How did you cast Tonight at 8:30 from such a diverse group? Is there a common thread (of love for Noël Coward)?

We used 44 actors. A large percentage of our membership had done Noël Coward plays, were very familiar with Noël Coward, and they were so enthusiastic about the idea of presenting Tonight at 8:30, which had not been done completely in L.A. since 1942. John and I came to the directors and said, "O.K. We've got this play; this is the one you wanted to do. Here are the actors we think should be involved. What do you think?" Given who our actors are, most of the directors just said, "Oh my God, that's fantastic!" They were just so eager to direct the caliber of people with whom we get to work.

Antaeus is presenting performance workshops this winter on Chekhov, Ibsen, Strindberg, American Classics, Restoration Comedy, and Shakespeare? Will Coward be offered in a future workshop? I teach acting, and in my Antaeus classes, I teach a month-long workshop on Coward. Since Tonight at 8:30, I have been reading all the Coward plays I had missed: notably, *Waiting in the Wings*. We're looking to do a workshop of that this summer. We have terrific older actresses **IN OUR** company, and Coward includes fabulous roles that require such discipline and such control, plus there's a comic range perfect for our company. Actors rarely get to test their skills as much as when they perform Coward.

After reading the Letters of Noël Coward, I got very excited about *Waiting in the Wings*, especially because we have so many wonderful older actresses. I'm not saying it's definite yet, but I'm very excited about putting these great actresses together and doing a workshop of *Waiting in the Wings* for ClassicsFest this summer.

Until last year's production in England, *The Better Half* was unpublished and had not been produced for 85 years. How did you discover *The Better Half* and what prompted you to add it to your benefit performance of *Shadow Play* and *Ways and Means*?

While we were negotiating for rights with Alan Brodie, we read about *The Better Half* in *The New York Times*. I wrote to Mr. Brodie about it, and he was kind enough to send me the script and to give us permission to perform it for the benefit. Jonathan Lynn, the head of our artistic advisory board and a friend of Mr. Brodie, will be directing this special benefit performance. As far as we know, we will be presenting the U. S. Premiere of *The Better Half*.

Paired with *Shadow Play*, *The Better Half* is exquisite. It's thematically related, it's about marriages and how marriages succeed and fail, and it's very, very similar in tone. All three of the plays have as their central set piece a bed! And, in both *The Better Half* and *Shadow Play*, they're talking about going to "Alice's party" and what Alice's parties are like — **many themes are** entwined together **between these two plays**. Antaeus needs to do more than Coward in our classical repertoire, but I think these three plays together will make such a great production! It's very hard for me to get excited about anything else, because I'm so excited about how these three plays go together!

(Please confirm that you want the following paragraph included in the article. Any permission/copyright issues?) **Kathy, good call. I'd rather not have this paragraph appear until I am sure I have full permission from Mr. Brodie.**

When Mr. Brodie sent us the manuscript, what he sent us was an exact copy of what they found in the

which Mr. Brodie sent us the manuscript, what he sent us was an exact copy of what they found in the British library, with the crossed out lines and Noël Coward's notes; it's a Xerox copy. We're going to do a nice binding of the annotated script and give it as a gift to our supporters who come to see the play. They'll be able to go home with a personal copy with all the notes and everything.

Any comments on the Noël Coward Society?

Before we started work on the production of Tonight at 8:30, I didn't know there was a Noël Coward Society. I'm so glad we joined. I'm so appreciative that the Coward Society was there to help us in such a variety of ways that made our production a success. It's wonderful that a group of like-minded people created the Society, and that theatres like ours can take advantage of the resources it has to offer.

A final quest: the other unpublished play I'm trying to get my hands on is Volcano. Any leads? Personally, I'm just in a whole Coward "in love" phase! It's all I want to read these days.

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