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REVIEWS



Jocelyn Towne and Deborah Puette in Lillian Hellman's play *The Little Foxes* at the Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center. (Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography)

The Little Foxes

Reviewed by Iris Mann
Antaeus Theatre Company
Through December 10

RECOMMENDED

They just don't write them like this anymore. Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* runs two-and-a-half hours and is structured in three acts (a rarity these days) — yet its tale of an avaricious Southern family at each other's throats over a promising business deal flies by like lightning. Premiering on Broadway in 1939, adapted for the screen in 1941 and revived in New York at least 4 times over the years, the play is given a splendid rendering by Antaeus Theatre Company.

According to the program, the title hearkens back to a chapter from the Song of Solomon in the King James version of the Bible: "Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes."

The drama takes place in a small Alabama town circa 1900, as the South was transitioning from an agrarian to a more industrialized society following Reconstruction. The core of the story is modern, however; it lays bare the cold, venal aspects of the American economic system, stripped of the complexities of current day finance. (Also, it's widely held that the play's grasping characters are based on some of Hellman's own relatives.)

The principal protagonist is Regina Hubbard Giddins (Deborah Puette), a cold, ambitious schemer who wants to escape her surroundings and live prosperously in Chicago. To do so, she must come up with \$75,000, her share of the money for a deal with her two equally grasping brothers, Oscar (Rob Nagle) and Ben (Mike McShane). Their project is to bring a cotton mill to their town, which is rich with cotton fields.

In that pre-feminist period, a family's inheritance usually went to the male heirs, so Regina has to depend on her ailing husband, Horace (John DeMita), for the funds. She sends their daughter, Alexandra (Kristin Couture) to bring him home from Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, where he is being treated. But, once home, Horace refuses to give her the money. So brother Oscar persuades his nasty, somewhat dimwitted son Leo (Calvin Picou), who works in a bank, to "borrow" Horace's bonds from the safe deposit box, thereby covering Regina's share of the investment, but cutting her out completely.

Horace discovers the plot but refuses to give Regina the opportunity to move against her brothers. He tells her he will say that he willingly lent them the bonds, an action that prompts her to wickedly extreme lengths to prevail.

The drama is staged with a sure hand and great finesse by director Cameron Watson, who wisely allows Hellman's incisive scenario, dialogue, and fascinatingly malicious characters to confront the audience unvarnished. He choreographs the action seamlessly and elicits uniformly excellent performances from his cast.

Puette subtly projects a manipulative and magnetic Regina, falsely ingratiating when necessary, while displaying her vicious claws only on occasion, as when she thunders at Horace, "I hope you die!" At those moments, her frustrated rage is palpable. That said, the casualness with which her Regina informs Horace about why she married him dilutes the deliciously seething bitterness the character must be harboring. Puette executes this approach beautifully, but it is a debatable choice.

Nagle hits just the right note as Oscar, skillfully transmitting the man's greed, crudeness, cruelty and deep-seated sense of inferiority. His multi-layered performance suggests a concealed cowardice that's masked by his bullying whoever might be a convenient target.

As Ben, McShane is total control, effortlessly projecting the unflappable, sanguine disposition of someone who rolls with the punches. Although Ben is seemingly unperturbed by an unlucky turn of events, McShane manages to convey the imperceptible hawkishness of a man waiting for his opponent to flounder.

The role of Birdie (Jocelyn Towne), Oscar's browbeaten wife and the only member of the clan to come from genuine aristocratic stock, might be played as a stereotypically timid, weak victim. But Towne has an interesting, inventive take on the woman, and portrays her as a high-spirited, kind and sensitive soul, worn down by years of disdainful, abusive treatment. She exhibits an astonishing level of forcefulness when she reveals that she doesn't have "headaches," as the family claims to outsiders, but does have a drinking problem that stems from her realization that Oscar never loved her, but married her only to obtain her family's cotton fields.

As Alexandria, Couture exudes a captivating spunk that culminates in a clear-eyed view of Regina. Timothy Allen Venable is charming as William Marshall, the businessman from Chicago who spearheads the crucial deal, while Calvin Picou fully inhabits the role of Leo. And DeMita fashions a sympathetic Horace; in ill health, he's roused to spurts of strength when opposing Regina or when acting out of concern for his daughter's well-being.

William L. Warren lends considerable dimension to Cal, the household's African-American employee, portraying him with humor and humanity. As Addie, the African-American domestic, Judy Louise Johnson delivers a well-rounded interpretation of a woman who manages to speak her mind when the welfare of those she loves are at stake.

John Iacovelli's exquisite scenic design takes the audience back to a bygone era, and the costuming by Terri A. Lewis enhances the effect immeasurably.

Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center, 110 East Broadway, Glendale; Fri.- Sat, 8:00 p.m.; Mon., 8:00 p.m.; Sun. 2:00 p.m.; through Dec. 10. (818) 506-1983 or www.Antaeus.org. Running time: two hours and 30 minutes. with two intermissions.

