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Review: 'The Women' a lively revival at Theatre West

May 28, 2013 | By Margaret Gray

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“What else is there for a woman but *l’amour*?” wistfully muses a character in Clare Boothe Luce’s “The Women,” in a good-humored revival at Theatre West. “Well, there’s a little corn whiskey left,” retorts another.

Luce’s waspish dialogue, which relentlessly punctures the self-delusions of her delightfully and variously odious women, may account for the perpetual popularity of her 1936 play (and the 1939 George Cukor film based on it, which stars a Who’s Who of 1930s actresses: Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, Paulette Goddard — you name her, she’s in it).



Edith (Anne Leyden, left) and Sylvia (Leona Britton) dish about their friends... (Thomas Mikusz)

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Also, not only was “The Women” groundbreaking for its era, the first Broadway show with an all-female cast, but every subsequent generation discovers afresh how oddly contemporary its sendup of pampered, vain, backbiting, sexually candid New York socialites feels. *You mean*, we ask, checking the date again in disbelief, *they had bitchiness way back then?*

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Yes, it turns out that not even the “Real Housewives” series is a new frontier — although Luce’s negative female stereotypes are better written. At Theatre West, on a pretty set by David Offner, Arden Teresa Lewis directs with a light hand, cutting back the original army of a cast to a not inconsiderable 18, playing up the funniest exchanges and marching as briskly as possible through the cumbersome plot (which even so begins to drag in the third hour).

Through the machinations of her gossipy friend Sylvia (Leona Britton, playing a comically stylized 1930s villainess), saintly Mary Haines (Maria Kress) learns that her husband has fallen for salesgirl Crystal Allen

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(Caitlin Gally, very Mae West). Mary sets him free to marry Crystal, then waits until Crystal messes up (as man-stealing salesgirls can be counted on to do) to reclaim him in triumph — the entire project accomplished entirely without his involvement.

Although the plot is the play's clumsiest aspect, it does leave room for entertaining character studies: an unmarried novelist named Nancy (Dianne Travis) has the tartest comebacks; the perennially pregnant yet deeply unmaternal Edith (Anne Leyden) gets the biggest laughs. Although wobbly in places, this lively production proves that life does offer women at least one alternative to love and corn whiskey: satire.

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"The Women." Theatre West, 3333 Cahuenga Blvd. West, Hollywood. 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Ends June 16. \$25-\$28. (323) 851-7977 or www.theatrewest.org. Running time: 2 hours, 45 minutes.

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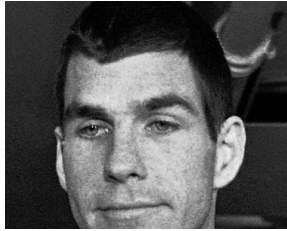
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