

An Uncertain Future — Opening the Curtain — KCRW

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This is Anthony Byrnes *Opening the Curtain* on LA Theater for KCRW.

One of the joys of the "great plays," or really any great art from another time, is discovering a voice from the past illuminating the present.

Listening to Ibsen's classic *Hedda Gabler* at Antaeus Theatre Company, I was struck by unexpected resonances from a play I thought I knew. The Antaeus production has an edge to it that's usually smoothed over by the haze of doing a period play, as if the moment you step into another time with a waistcoat there's a gentility and perhaps a polite nobility.

If you've never seen the play, it opens as Jorgen Tesman and his new bride Hedda Gabler return to a new home after an extended honeymoon. Tesman's nervous. He's extended himself for this new home and there's uncertainty surrounding his future prospects that once felt assured. The cause of that uncertainty is Eilert Lovborg, the unstable, passionate genius who appears in act two with his new book.

Antaeus' production is based on a version by Andrew Upton. Mr. Upton takes the liberty to expand a touch on the content of this manuscript. It's only a couple of lines but it brings Lovborg's thesis into sharp focus.

Lovborg is arguing passionately for how our past, our history, informs our future. He says, "I apply my historical theory to current reality and uncover the forces at work that are generating the future . . . I discuss the boons and the terrible problems we will face . . . I've reconceived history. It's part of us."

Sitting in Antaeus' North Hollywood theater for the last time before they move to their new home in Glendale with the uncertainty of the 99-seat plan looming in the distance, I couldn't help but superimpose the ideas of the play on the realities of the theater company.

Without getting bogged down in minutiae, the 99 seat plan which has been the status quo for the last 30 years has allowed intimate theaters to produce with actors essentially volunteering their time for gas money. Last year, the actors' union, Actors' Equity, decided it was time to do away with this plan and instead insist that actors' be paid a minimum wage. As a result a group of actors threatened to sue their own union, claiming, in part, that the ability to make art was more important to them than an occasional paycheck. Negotiations to prevent that lawsuit recently broke down so the uncertainty that plagued the theater community last year has returned. The theater communities past is indeed shaping its future.

To be clear, Antaeus, as a membership company enjoys an exception to the new union rules but there are those in the theater community, myself included, who worry about how long that reprieve will last. Antaeus, with classically large casts and partner casting is both exactly the kind of professional company Los Angeles needs and one that would be profoundly affected by the new rules. Like Tesman, their new home likely comes with as many questions as it does answers.

Let's hope Antaeus cuts through that uncertainty as clearly as it cut through this classic.

Hedda Gabler closes this weekend at Antaeus Theater Company in North Hollywood.

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Running time: 2 hours and 15 minutes with an intermission.