

THE CHALK GARDEN



Courtesy Theatricum Botanicum

BY CLAIRE FORDHAM

Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden* opened to a packed Theatricum Botanicum where the audience was treated to witty dialogue and awesome acting in this comedy of English manners.

Inspired by Bagnold's own garden in Sussex, England, *The Chalk Garden* is set in a faded manor house by the sea. Dyed-in-the wool British dowager Mrs. St. Maugham (an engaging Ellen Geer) is an eccentric with two obsessions: caring for her troubled teenage granddaughter, Laurel (played with gusto and grit by Carmen Flood, pictured above with), and growing a traditional English garden in the harsh, chalk soil of the surrounding grounds.

The mysterious Miss Madrigal (a sublime Melora Marshall), with her vast knowledge of gardening, is hastily hired as Laurel's companion, despite her lack of references, to the chagrin of household valet Maitland, played by Michael Nehring with a strong, comic turn.

Skillfully directed by Susan Angelo, *The Chalk Garden* begins when Miss Madrigal sits quietly waiting to be interviewed as Maitland, Mrs. St. Maugham, and Laurel burst onto the stage revealing themselves to be the loud, self-absorbed characters that they are.

Geer, Flood, and Nehring play their roles effectively for maximum laughs. There's much darting about the stage and exaggerated hand movements. This is almost classic screwball comedy, with a touch of English farce. It's great fun.

But there's something about the subtlety and nuance that Marshall brings to the role of Miss Madrigal that lingers in the mind. As Topangans still talk glowingly about Melora Marshall's past portrayals as Puck (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), they'll also think fondly and admiringly of her as Miss Madrigal.

Willow Geer as Laurel's mother, Olivia, also went for the "less is more" approach and delivers another excellent performance. She has had terrific teachers and mentors in her mother (Ellen Geer) and aunt (Melora Marshall) and has studied and learned her craft exceptionally well.

It's a joy to see these three leading ladies on stage sparring together. Then came an unexpected treat for this reviewer who has not previously had the pleasure of seeing William Dennis Hunt act.

As Mrs. Maugham's former beau, "Puppy," and an esteemed judge, Hunt delivers a brilliant performance as a crusty and wise old man that reminded me of English acting great Sir Ralph Richardson at the height of his powers. Such terrific timing and oratory.

All the actors are to be commended for their upper-class English accents. Marshall especially nailed it.

Strong and entertaining supporting performances also came from Cindy Guastafarro and Anne Perrochet as Miss Madrigal's fellow interviewees for the companion post, and Holly Hawk as the nurse.

There's much to savor in *The Chalk Garden*. Director Susan

Angelo said, "There are so many intertwining themes and ideas in this multi-layered play. It's about the old guard giving way to the new, about fostering or stagnating growth, about the search for justice, and how the truth ultimately sets us free. The relationships are human and complex. Beneath the comic English manner style, there is mystery, jealousy, and deep longing. So many secrets, and lots of intrigue."

It would be churlish to point out the unresolved story lines in Bagnold's play. Maybe just one. What was the point of the never seen nor heard "Old Bastard" Pinkbell, apart from the fact he was a terrible gardener for 40 years until he became bedridden and out of sight?

We haven't seen *Haiti* yet at Theatricum but that promises to be serious and thought provoking. *The Chalk Garden* will surely be the 2018 season's most enjoyable and popular production.

Directed by Susan Angelo, *The Chalk Garden* runs in repertory through September 30. A round of applause for set designer Rich Rose, lighting design by Zach Moore, sound design by Israel Heller and prop master Sydney Russell. Kudos and cheers for costume design to Jordan Marc Diamond. ■

For tickets: (310) 455-3723; or theatricum.com. Adults: \$38.50 (lower tier); \$25 (upper tier). Seniors (65+); Students, Military Veterans, Teachers, AEA Members: \$25/\$15; Children (5-15): \$10; Children 4 and under: Free.

Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum is located at 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga CA 90290 (midway between Pacific Coast Highway and the Ventura Freeway).

The outdoor amphitheaters at Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum are terraced into the hillside of the rustic canyon. Audience members are advised to dress casually (warmly for evenings) and bring cushions for bench seating. Patrons are welcome to arrive early and picnic before a performance.