

Review

CHARLES McNULTY
THEATER CRITICOlder
actresses
shine in
Coward
revival

"Waiting in the Wings" doesn't come around all that often. A late play of Noël Coward's, it was considered outdated when it premiered in 1960. In Britain, the "angry young men" movement led by John Osborne in the theater was underway, and the social pretensions and expertly crafted witticisms of Coward's comedies had fallen out of fashion.

The play only had its Broadway debut in 1999, in a production that starred Rosemary Harris and Lauren Bacall. The script was revised, but even still it was seen as a dramatic throwback to a quaint yet belabored school of playwriting. What redeems this creakily plotted work is the showcase it provides for a company of savvy older actresses.

These contradictory impressions persist in the new production of "Waiting in the Wings," running in repertory at Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum through Oct. 10. Experiencing Coward outdoors on a summer night is both an amusing delight and an expositional slog. He sets so many plots in motion that you can't help wishing he might forget about one or two of them.

[See 'Waiting,' E3]



IAN FLANDERS

MICHELE Schultz, left, Ellen Geer, Cynthia Kania at the Theatricum.



MIRANDA Heath, left, Will Collyer and Isabel Stallings in Coward's 1960 play.

Savvy actresses elevate 'Waiting in the Wings'

['Waiting,' from E1]

But the play, which is set in "The Wings," a charity home for retired actresses, provides a feast for veteran thespians for whom it would be impolite to ask their age. Led by Susan Angelo, Jan Wikstrom and Ellen Geer, this ensemble, under the direction of Willow Geer, diverts and distracts from the mustier aspects of Coward's style.

Wikstrom plays May Davenport, one of the residents at the retirement home. She has retained her regal hauteur and formidable sangfroid, the same qualities that made her such a sensation on the British stage. A paragon of good taste, she is reserved by nature but knows how to wield a melodramatic gesture when the occasion calls for one, as it does when she hears the dreaded news that Lotta

Bainbridge (Angelo), her detested rival, is moving into the home.

It wasn't competition over a part that kept them from speaking for the last 30 years. Their feud has more personal roots, which Coward takes his time to reveal. But May's impenetrable froideur toward Lotta makes life chilly for everyone around her.

The residents may have plenty of complaints about being sent out to pasture when they're still dreaming of the spotlight. But they're a good-humored set and don't like it when tensions linger. Cora Clarke (Cynthia Kania) might be astringent in her remarks and Deirdre O'Malley (Earnestine Phillips) may be full of fire and brimstone, but all these old girls need is the tinkle of a show tune to brighten their moods.

I loved watching Katherine Griffith's Bonita Belgrave, Gini Autumn Benson's Almina Clare, Jane Macfie's Maudie Melrose and Michele Schultz's Estelle Craven find wily laughs in unexpected places. But it's the rift between May and Lotta that centers this busy story, which includes more subplots than can be quickly synopsized here.

Not all of the secondary characters are well cast. A few of the subordinate roles are amateurishly performed, but the main parts are vividly pulled off, and I was generally impressed by the ensemble's flow and cohesion.

The storyline involving Sarita Myrtle (Ellen Geer), one of the dotier residents who has a dangerous penchant for stealing matches, brings into stark relief the frighteningly vulnerable reality of getting older. It's not



Photographs by IAN FLANDERS

JAN Wikstrom, left, and Susan Angelo portray rivals living under the same roof.

'Waiting in the Wings'

Where: Will Geer Theatrum Botanicum, 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga

When: In rotating repertory through Oct. 3. (Check website for exact dates.)

Tickets: \$15-\$63

Contact: theatrum.com

Running time: 2 hours, 45 minutes (including one 10-minute intermission)

just these retired actresses who are waiting in the wings but death itself.

The secondary plot concerning Zelda Fenwick (Isabel Stallings), a guileless tabloid journalist who is writing under cover a story about the once-famous denizens of the retirement home,

reflects Coward's belief that, while motives may be impure, people can't entirely be written off as rogues. (Especially when expiation brings not only a case of champagne but the money for a longed-for solarium.)

No one exemplifies this generous worldview better than Lotta, who turns out not to be the villain of May's darkest imaginings but a complicated, compassionate and rather philosophical human being. Their eventual detente turns into something more meaningful for both of them, and Wikstrom and Angelo exercise the perfect amount of restraint to make their characters' tentative friendship believable.

Coward has undergone a reassessment since he fell out of favor after his prime. The darker strains in his comedies have been drawn out by directors eager to

show there's more to the playwright than his drawing room panache.

"Waiting in the Wings" is unlikely to be included in this reconsideration. The play is clearly the property of another era—an era predating even when the work was written. In both tone and structure, it harks back to the kind of theatrical properties that May and Lotta excelled in during the first half of the 20th century.

This style still has its charms, but the play needs a more decisive editing hand than the one that is free enough to change Deirdre's background from an Irish woman to a Black American but hesitant to do the kind of pruning that a modern revival demands. Still, it's a banquet for older actresses, who get to prove that, while minds and bodies are mortal, artistry doesn't have an expiration date.