



SPELLBINDER—Jenny O'Hara and Gretchen Corbett (r) in L.A. Stage Company production of *The Fox*.

Theater Review

L.A. Theater Production Of 'Fox' A True Spellbinder

By Heidi Aspaturian

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"The Fox" is now at the L.A. Stage Company, and it's a spellbinder — a drama of muscular poetry and vision and a psychological thriller that may knock the breath out of you. The director, Allan Miller, has adapted the D.H. Lawrence story with an unerring sense of its dramatic power; and the performances by Michael Horton, Jenny O'Hara, and Gretchen Corbett are equally remarkable. The grand pessimist of passion, Lawrence himself, would applaud — intensely, of course.

"The Fox," opens on a note of eerie tranquility, which doesn't sound for long. Two women are living alone on an isolated farm in England, facing the onset of a bleak winter. They are devoted to each other, but whether they have ever been lovers remains ultimately as mysterious as the nature of all the relationships to emerge here, including man's ties to nature itself.

Nature — animal and human — begins to put Jill (Corbett) and Nellie (O'Hara) through the wringer, and the ties that bind slowly tighten around them. They have exiled themselves to be safe from society but are now preyed upon by a fox who is raiding their henhouse and threatening their livelihood and fragile independence. Nellie, seemingly the more self-sufficient and "masculine" one, has been stalking the fox daily and it has been stalking her at night in strange dreams. At this pregnant juncture, Henry (Horton), a soldier home from World War I, appears at their door.

Henry is younger than both women and apparently overflowing with boyish vigor and goodwill — the warmest thing for miles around. He says that he used to live on the farm with his grandfather and turns his bright charm on the present owners. Jill responds enthusiastically — whether

from friendship, romance, or interest in having a man around to do heavy work, we're never quite sure — but Nellie brusquely repulses the intruder. Henry vows to trap the fox and steadily usurps its role as predator.

His presence soon threatens to destroy everything the women believe they have worked for. Spurred by Nellie's snubs, he sets out to alienate her from Jill. Jill reacts savagely, and the young soldier's radiant eagerness to please quickly turns into an overpowering will to have his own way. What starts in the cold ends in a chilling catastrophe.

With Lawrence, sexual strife is always more like an elemental struggle between species, and once the battle lines are drawn, Miller never lets them slacken. His gripping adaptation and staging cut like lightning to the heart of the conflict until the air fairly bristles with electricity — then, he raises the stakes. Once or twice his inspired hand slips a bit (it doesn't seem necessary that Henry's fingers ever curl like claws), but the execution is generally splendid.

The acting is just as exceptional. As the open-faced, two-faced fox, Horton nearly makes off with the stage in a stunning performance. His Henry is very much "the natural man," with all the marauding instinct and amoral vitality the phrase suggests. His soldiering sums up his character: he's out to win and once he wants something it's already his, so far as he's concerned. He knows how to conceal his readiness to spring with frisky energy; like the fox, he's an engaging but ruthless carnivore. It's a seemingly effortless and utterly fascinating portrayal.

O'Hara as Nellie (Kathleen Lloyd has the role on weekends) is wholly convincing in her fierce skepticism about Henry, slightly less so when she's thrown by his remorseless pursuit. She succeeds beautifully where it matters most, in showing how Nellie's dream of escaping all constrictions tempts her to identify with the boy whose strength and independence look like everything she wants for herself. By the time she realizes what's underneath it all, it's too late.

Corbett as Jill is a delight — a sleek cat with very sharp claws and no hesitation in using them. Corbett's robust sense of irony is a rare pleasure; so are her incisive readings, which make simply saying a name into a caress or a declaration of war.

The set — a farmhouse whose homeliness suggest the harshness beyond — is as amazingly apt as the rest of the production. All the more so, since it was apparently devised by committee. Christopher Miliken's lighting illuminates the beauty and desolation of the winterscape.

"The Fox," incidentally, is the second production to be featured at the L.A. Stage Company. It opened its doors with the fine "Uncommon Women" in the spring, and now it's got this powerhouse of a play. Two first-rate showings in a row augur well for the new Equity theater; at least someone's batting 1,000 this season.

"The Fox" continues through August, Tuesday-Sunday, at the L.A. Stage Company, 1642 North Las Palmas, in Hollywood; 461-2755.