

## Theater review

# 'The Gin Game'

Deaf West Theatre, North Hollywood  
Through Dec. 17

By Ed Kaufman

American playwright D.L. Coburn's comedy-drama "The Gin Game," the story of two elderly people who meet in a state-sponsored nursing home, is an engaging gem of a show at Deaf West Theatre — and certainly different in a couple of ways.

First, its outstanding actresses, Phyllis Frelich (Tony winner for "Children of a Lesser God") and Freda Norman are deaf and use sign language as a way of communicating. As they sign, talented hearing actors Maureen Davis and Cal Bartlett portray nursing home staff who unobtrusively remain onstage and supply the "voice" for those who are not hearing-impaired.

And it works. After a short while, the audience settles into the fact that the revised "Gin Game" can wonderfully address those who hear words — as well as those who cannot.

Second, this "Gin Game" is a gender-bender. Coburn wrote the play for an aging couple; the gifted husband/wife team of Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy, who successfully played Broadway and toured the country in "Gin Game," immediately comes to mind.

Only fate stepped in at Deaf West Theatre when actor Bernard Bragg was not able to continue in the show — only a couple of weeks before previews. Out of this seeming necessity came a "gender switch"



Sign of the times: Phyllis Frelich, left, and Freda Norman

(and some minor script changes), and talented director Frelich emerged as the crusty, competitive and abusive Weller Martin (Frelich).

Again, it works because "Gin Game" is basically gender-neutral. It's all about the plight of the aged, their isolation and their aloneness. And what makes the Frelich version even more poignant is that these two elderly women are further isolated by the fact that they are the only two deaf people in a "hearing home," which, most assuredly, is their last.

What brings them together on the outside patio (the tasteful set of Robert Steinberg) is Weller's addiction to cards, especially gin rummy. Soon, shy, timid, seemingly naive newcomer Fonsia

### THE GIN GAME

#### Presented by the Deaf West Theatre

Playwright ..... D.L. Coburn  
ASL translations by ..... Linda Bove  
Director ..... Phyllis Frelich  
Producer/sound designer ..... Bill O'Brien  
Costume designer ..... Young Lee  
Set designer ..... Robert Steinberg  
Lighting designer ..... Jacqui Jones Watson

#### Cast:

Weller Martin ..... Phyllis Frelich  
Fonsia Dorsey ..... Freda Norman  
Voice of Weller ..... Cal Bartlett  
Voice of Fonsia ..... Maureen Davis

(Norman) reluctantly joins her in playing an ongoing gin game.

The numerous games (which Fonsia wins) become a metaphor for their frustrations, disappointments, anger and angst. And their burgeoning friendship — the last either of them will ever have — is tragically undercut by the ghosts of their pasts. □

## STAGES

# Who dealt?

## Cast change puts play off its 'Game'

By Evan Henerson  
Staff Writer

In 1990, Deaf West Theater entered the theatrical arena with a production of D.L. Coburn's codger-dramedy "The Gin Game." Ten years later, the company is concluding its 2000 season — its first at its new home on Lankershim in NoHo — with the same play. A cause

**REVIEW** for celebration? Not entirely. Some questionable directorial choices hurt this latest effort.

The impulse to adapt this play for deaf characters and audiences is certainly understandable. Weller and Fonsia, Coburn's lonely card players, lend themselves quite nimbly to the type of isolation that would go with being the only two deaf people at a retirement home. It makes sense they'd find each other, find common interests and band against the rest of the facility.

And in Deaf West's adaptation, their bitterness and loneliness is given a context: Not only do Fonsia and Weller find themselves outcasts at Bently Manor, they've been abandoned by family members — in certain cases, hearing family members.

It's no stretch to accept the character of Weller being played as a woman, a move necessitated at Deaf West by an 11th-hour casting switch. "The Gin Game"

can be a kind of courtship (past pairings have included Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn and Julie Harris and Charles Durning), but it doesn't have to be. Deaf West could do a lot worse than Phyllis Frelich, the production's director, who stepped into the role of Weller when Bernard Bragg was forced to withdraw due to health reasons.

But problems arise when you start to mess with the characters' isolation — when there are other people out on that porch listening to the gossip between Fonsia and Weller or watching the fateful card game. In Deaf West's production, Frelich makes retirement home staff members out of Cal Bartlett and Maureen Davis, the two on-stage actors who supply Fonsia and Weller's voices for hearing audience members. It's a critical misstep for several reasons.

Looming in full view, the two actors are there to make sure Weller takes her medicine, to find missing supplies or to intercede when the card game gets out of hand. But since these are actual characters, not just voices, it seems more than a little odd that they don't report what they've seen to management and separate Weller and Fonsia once and for all.

What's more, their half-participating presence is distracting. "The Gin Game" is kind of a dance — two characters who weave important dia-

logue during an ongoing gin rummy match. Tricky as it already is to weave the expository dialogue into the progression of a card game — while signing, no less — you really gum up the works when an audience's focus is directed away from the two characters constructing the web. In the private little universe established by Coburn, extra people — even necessary ones — should be heard but not seen.

That said, Frelich (who played Fonsia at Deaf West 10 years ago) and Freda Norman are both entertaining to watch. We buy their uneasy friendship despite the obvious differences between them, and we become uneasy when it starts to break down. The anger and bitterness of Frelich's performance rarely matches with the mellow, humor-laced line deliveries of Bartlett. Norman and Davis are better in synch.

Robert Steinberg has applied just the right amount of shabbiness to his set, and it's a nifty trick for such a small house to pull off onstage ram. Young Lee's costumes are appropriate as well. Both characters go from overcasual to a touch of primping in anticipation of their next meeting.

As professional as it looks, this production feels off. "The Gin Game" thrives on its privacy, an atmosphere Deaf West's production simply fails to establish.



Cal Bartlett and Maureen Davis peer through the window at card players Phyllis Frelich, left, and Freda Norman in the Deaf West Theatre production of "The Gin Game."

### "THE GIN GAME"

**Where:** Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood.

**When:** 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday, through Dec. 17.

**Tickets:** \$20. Call (818) 762-2773 or (818) 762-2782.

**Our rating:** ★★1/2

DAILY NEWS • FRIDAY • NOVEMBER 17, 2000

WEEKEND

LA LIFE

**CALENDAR** THEATER

**NEW REVIEWS**

**THE GIN GAME** As if mounting a deaf production of D.L. Coburn's two-person Pulitzer Prize winner didn't present enough challenges, director Phyllis Frelich has had to contend with her leading man withdrawing late in the going. But Frelich is nothing if not resourceful, and so she cast herself as his replacement. As it turns out, the part of Weller needn't be a man at all, and Frelich, a superb Tony-winning actor, is outstanding in the role, to which she lends new and welcome resonance. Set in a nursing home, the play centers on an increasingly tense series of gin games between two weathered but feisty coots: seemingly sweet Fonsia (a nuanced Freda Norman) and salty Weller. It is through cards that they get to know each other, though Coburn never allows the chitchat to stray too far from the game. This limited focus hurts the play, of course — questions of motivation, plausibility and resolution are never answered satisfactorily — but Frelich's sure directorial hand and her neat, albeit necessary, twist mitigate such shortcomings. Especially inspired is Frelich's manipulation of the speaking actors (Cal Bartlett and Maureen Davis) required for hearing patrons. (Frelich and Norman act using sign language.) Instead of placing them at the side of the stage, she incorporates them into the action as orderlies, their presence an enhancement rather than a distraction. Robert Steinberg's hyper-realistic set also deserves praise. Deaf West Theater, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Thurs.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2 & 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru Dec. 17. (818) 762-2773; TTY, (818) 762-2782. (David Mermelstein)

LA WEEKLY NOVEMBER 24 - 30, 2000

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# The Toluca Times

and Canyon Crier

Wednesday, November 29, 2000

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## 'Gin Game' Plays Out at Deaf West Theatre

By PAT TAYLOR

NORTH HOLLYWOOD--For years I've been touting the beauty of the ingenious, brilliant, well thought out Deaf West productions. Presenting theatre, combining deaf and hearing actors, in a way that totally spellbinds both deaf and hearing audiences, is a feat that blows me away, time after time.

The year 2000 has been one of long deserved recognition for Deaf West. In their new theatre in NoHo, they presented two excellent plays... *Streetcar Named Desire* and *Oliver*, both stunningly beautiful. For these efforts, they recently got 15 Ovation award nominations and won five of those categories. I couldn't be happier for them!

Their current offering, *Gin Game* is every bit as impressive, though it only has a cast of two



(Foreground: left to right) Phyllis Frelich (Weller) and Freda Norman (Fonsia) (Background: left to right) Cal Bartlett and Maureen Davis. Deaf West Theatre presents its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary production of 'The Gin Game' through December 17.

actors and two translators. Being a fan of the larger cast shows here, because the process is so interesting. I feared beforehand that I may not become as involved in this production. Fear for naught. I was pleasantly surprised and drawn into the magic once again immediately. Two of the finest and most well known deaf actresses in the world star here, as two lonely, elderly ladies building a relationship in a state funded nursing home.

Beautifully written by D.L. Coburn, *Gin Game* was done in New York by Hume Cronin and Jessica Tandy, and later by Brian Dennehy and Julie Harris, which I saw. This is a touching, volatile, in depth character study, of two very different types of women's interactions, while obsessively playing games of gin rummy. Heart rending performance by Freda Norman (Fonsia) as a

ladylike, shy, wisp of a woman, and a powerful, flawless portrayal of Phyllis Frelich (Weller) as an explosive "tough cookie", with the language of a sailor. Frelich also directed, with breathtaking sensitivity.

Without speaking, these two fine actresses blended, to paint

a poignant picture and tell a meaningful story, mesmerizing the entire audience. Wonderful, difficult work also, by their expressive, perfectly timed translators, Cal Bartlett and Maureen Davis. Robert Steinburgs lovely set and Young Lees appropriate costuming, rounded out the excellence. Another compelling, rewarding theatre experience at Deaf West... They never miss a beat!

Running Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. Sunday matinee at 3 p.m. through December 17 at the Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim in North Hollywood. For reservations call (818) 762-2773, box office or (818) 762-2782, TTY.

# BACKSTAGE

# WEST

THE ACTORS  
WEEKLY  
NEWSPAPER

November 30, 2000

## THE GIN GAME at Deaf West Theatre

Reviewed by Michael Green

If Sartre was on to something when he said that hell was other people, D.L. Coburn hones a finer edge in his Pulitzer Prize winner: "Yes, in the roles we create for them." The 1977 premiere cast Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy as Weller Martin and Fonsia Dorsey, two loveless seniors stuck in a decrepit nursing home, whose meeting offers some slim chance of respite from loneliness and perhaps at love. But as a game of cards progresses, each can't help but display the vicious torques of character that brought them to this grim place, despite living family, and recreate their same fates with each other.

Director Phyllis Frelich, from casting necessity, rewrote the DWT version for herself as Weller, with Freda Norman as Fonsia, drawn to each other as the only two deaf patients. Cal Bartlett and Maureen Davis—nicely placed as nursing aides—are their respective speaking voices in this signed production, Bartlett's gravelly baritone a necessary compromise. Robert Steinberg's marvelous set design conveys neglect and decay with labor-of-love details from the grimy walls to the frayed duct tape on the card table and the unwatered indoor plant amid a pile of its own dead leaves.

This was my first DWP performance, and I can only report what it was like as a first-time member of the secondary, hearing audience. I watched this production just after reading the play, which gave me goose bumps. The grand emotions of rage, shame, or pain come through loud and clear, and Norman is a special delight to watch. But nuanced emotions are rendered in a different language with subtleties beyond this non-signer's grasp, or pantomimed with a new spin: When Weller vows to control his temper, it's usually played with an internal tension resolving to keep silent what he considers his deserved anger; how different it is when Weller comically clops herself repeatedly

on the head self-punitively to show the sincerity of her promise. During one furious verbal exchange, I couldn't watch Norman but had to turn to Davis—not just a voice but also an actress—to have the words fit the facial expression. Otherwise, it's like a foreign movie with subtitles twice removed; even perfect phrasing can't fit the signed enunciation or gestures. This is as it should be, but it is demanding.

The performances are all of a very high order, but Frelich's Weller is often too cheerful or syrupy, especially her broad smile. Weller's cynicism doesn't come easily to her, and the cruelty of both characters taxes the resources of these actresses. Unfortunately, muffling the cruelty leads to a bungled finale. Weller takes pride in being a master of gin but has lost every single game to the seeming amateur, Fonsia. Weller is driven to infantile outbursts of rage that also reveal Fonsia's spiteful nature that has driven her husband and her son from her. "Vindictive! That's what you are," says Weller (in print), who wants one more chance to win. But "vindictive" here becomes "vicious," eliminating plotting to get even. The denouement (in text) comes when Fonsia has gin, but knows that her final discard card is what Weller—muttering "one card"—needs to go gin and win. In a moment made for pure visuals, Fonsia displays her final discard as though she's simply about to put it in Weller's grasp, but as Weller eagerly reaches for it she declares gin—a final, calculated, crushing humiliation that drives Weller away with the same finality as her family. This doesn't happen here, but it should: it's the nail that holds the painting on the wall.

*"The Gin Game," presented by and at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Larkershim Blvd., N. Hollywood. Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sat. 2 p.m., Sun. 3 p.m. Nov. 11-Dec. 17. \$15-20. (818) 762-2773; (818) 762-2782 (TTY).*

# NOHO > LLA

November 30, 2000 vol. 3 no. 6

## Gin Game a Winner

by Don Grgware

Deaf West Theatre has triumphed once again. Before last season's Ovation Award-winning production of *Oliver*, it had been unthinkable for a deaf ensemble to do a musical, but Deaf West did it, and the rest is history. Now, with its new signed, voiced, and gender-blind production of *The Gin Game* directed by veteran actress Phyllis Frelich, it treads more new ground only this time it happened quite by accident.

A few weeks ago, while in rehearsals for *The Gin Game*, the actor who was to play Weller became ill, leaving the production in dire straits. Director Frelich pondered what to do, and, at a company member's suggestion, decided to take on the role herself, despite the fact that Weller was written by D.L. Coburn for a male actor. Does Weller have to be a man? Could not the relationship explored be one between two women? And so the current exceptional production of *The Gin Game* was born.

Weller is a survivor, having been mistreated by her husband and various partners in the antiques business. She is cantankerous and speaks her mind. One very funny joke comes when Weller is

describing the oldsters in the nursing home as either catatonic zombies or obnoxious complainers. "Those who talk make you appreciate you're deaf. Another time Fonsia Dorsey (Freda Norman) expresses displeasure with Weller, saying, "You swear like a man."

The second act of Coburn's brilliant exercise analyzes the "controlling" element at play in the game. Fonsia wins without plan or scheme, but Weller knows that she is "reading her mind," as she discards and picks up new cards. Fonsia is accused of being vindictive - a bitch who turns

away everyone in her life, just as she turned away her husband and son. Weller in turn is accused of being crazy, dishonest, vulgar - or maybe just a victim of bad luck and bad judgment. Whatever the case, Weller loses continually to Fonsia, and a friendship between them is next to impossible.

Maureen Davis is the voice of Fonsia and Cal Bartlett the voice of Weller, both sitting on the porch with the two main characters, interacting at times as nurse and attendant to the patients, dispensing medications or breaking up fights. They add a very enjoyable atmosphere to the main action of the play.

Suffice to say that Phyllis Frelich is magnificent, both as actress and director. Thanks to her expertise, DWT can be extra proud of yet another challenging production. See guide for listing.



Freda Norman & Phyllis Frelich in *The Gin Game* at Deaf West Theatre

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LOS ANGELES

### **The Gin Game**



Having failed in my journalistic duties by neglecting to review either of Deaf West's two previous offerings (the multi Ovation Award-winning productions of *Oliver!* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*), I almost sheepish in finally getting around to seeing *The Gin Game*, the company's final show of the year.

It is a pleasure to report that this revival of D.L. Coburn's Pulitzer Prize-winner about two elderly nursing home inhabi-



tants is remarkably engrossing, and in some ways an improvement on the original, Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy notwithstanding.

Due to a last-minute illness during rehearsals, director Phyllis Frelich (who assayed the female role of Fonsia in Deaf West's inaugural production 10 years ago) assumed the male role of Weller, and the gender-switch adds immeasurably to the proceedings. With no more than the slightest textual revisions bowing to hearing-impairment and gender-shift, the battle of wills becomes rather more enigmatic and universal, and reaches a powerful, even unsettling conclusion.

This is, of course, to due to Coburn's basically sound structure, as well as the ingenious way in which hearing actors Maureen Davis and Cal Bartlett (both excellent) are utilized as staff members and vocal counterparts without intruding upon the central pair. The technical presentation is marvelous, with Robert Steinberg's set, Young Lee's costumes, Jacqui Jones Watson's lighting, Bill O'Brien's sound design, and Linda Bove's ASL supervision all first-rate.

But, really, it is in the flying hands and mercurial expressions of the ever-superb Frelich and the equally wonderful Freda Norman (as Fonsia) that the deepest recesses of character truth are revealed, and elevate a competent vehicle for veteran character stars to a peculiarly resonant experience. By turns funny, surprising, and heartbreaking, the winners in this *Gin Game* are the play, this incomparable company, and most definitely the audience.

*The Gin Game* is at Deaf West Theatre Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., NoHo; (818) 762-2772 or (818) 762-2782 (TTY); Thurs. & Fri., 8 p.m., Sat., 2 & 8 p.m., and Sun., 3 p.m., through Dec. 17.