

## THEATER REVIEW

# A House Of Women, Captives Of Mother

By SARAH BOXER

Imagine "Cinderella" writ large and dark and princeless. A mother keeps all five of her daughters and her own mother locked up in the house, away from the gaze of prying neighbors and prowling men. She watches over the house, ready to snuff out the slightest sign of life under her roof. But oh, what she misses!

Federico García Lorca wrote "The House of Bernarda Alba," a play for an all-female cast, two months before he was shot by one of Francisco Franco's firing squads in 1936. The play is certainly a vision of what it is like to live under a dictator. But, as Chay Yew's adaptation for the National Asian American Theater Company proves, the play also works as a meditation on the consequences of caring too deeply about what the neighbors think.

Twenty Asian women, all dressed in black, march by a bed of red rose petals onto a stage of plain blond wood. It is a visual and aural knock-out. Some of the women play the mother and daughters. The rest, lined up against the back wall and looking out, become the elements outside — the moaning wind, the pattering rain and, most important of all, the eyes of the world, always watching.

As the play opens, the father has just died. The mother, Bernarda Alba, an imperious and elegant tyrant played with taut restraint by Ching Valdes-Aran, tells her daughters that they will be mourning him for the next eight years. And not because their daddy was such a wonderful husband. The calm young maid, Blanca (Michi Barall), a cheerful scrubber, reveals that the old man had been "lifting my skirts behind the barn door" for years.

The daughters are not the only ones to suffer under Bernarda Alba's tyranny. Bernarda's crazy mother, Maria Josefa (Gusti Bogard), spends the play dressed up in a white wedding gown and wailing. "I don't care if she throws herself" down a well, Bernarda says. "I care if the neigh-



Richard Termine for The New York Times

Narrow lives: From "The House of Bernarda Alba" by García Lorca.

## THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA

By Federico García Lorca; adapted and directed by Chay Yew, with songs by Fabian Obispo. Sets by Sarah Lambert; costumes by Elly van Horne; lighting by Stephen Petrilli; sound by Laura Grace Brown; choreography by Kristin Jackson; fight choreography by Michael G. Chin; flyer design by Gabriela Lopez; stage manager, Erika H. Sellin. Presented by the National Asian American Theater Company, Mia Katigbak, artistic and producing director. At Intar 53, 508 West 53rd Street, Clinton.

WITH: Ching Valdes-Aran (Bernarda Alba), Gusti Bogard (Maria Josefa), Natsuko Ohama (Angustias), Sophia Morae (Magdalena), Julienne Hanzelka Kim (Amelia), Eunice Wong (Adela), Julyana Soelistyo (Martirio), Michi Barall (Blanca) and Kati Kuroda (La Poncia).

neighbors can see her from their windows."

Bernarda is a complex woman. She is a dictator, and yet she does not seem all evil or all wrong. She hates men, one guesses, for a reason. When she closes up the house, she does it partly out of sadism and partly out of misguided protectiveness.

The daughters are an assortment of psychological consequences. The two eldest daughters have lost all spark. Angustias, the eldest, played as a simpering oaf by Natsuko Ohama, is too dim to realize that her fiancé, Pepe, is marrying her for the money she will inherit and is cheating on her in the meantime. The next sister in line, Magdalena (Sophia Morae), is bitter and twisted. She says of her sister Angustias, "She's a sick old hag," then adds the softener: "I say all of this with love."

The younger sisters still have spunk. Bookish Amelia, played with

understated humor by Julienne Hanzelka Kim, rails against the enslavement of women. Martirio (Julyana Soelistyo) deceives everyone, including herself. She claims she is afraid of men and their "humongous filthy feet," but she secretly loves Pepe. Adela, the youngest and most beautiful, played with fire by Eunice Wong, rebels. While everyone else is indoors in black, she sneaks out in red to meet Pepe.

There is one pathology that none of the women escapes: a love of spying. In captivity, they live only to see what others are doing and to keep others from seeing what they are doing.

For all the spying, though, only one of Bernarda Alba's captives sees everything — the hardy and lusty servant, La Poncia (Kati Koroda), who gives Bernarda a memorably double-edged massage. "Open your eyes," she commands her mistress, pounding on her back. But she is shut out: "Nothing is going on," Bernarda, the mother, shouts, trying to will it to be true. Only in the last scene does Bernarda see how severely she has failed.

Despite the hothouse hysteria of the house of Alba, this is a gorgeous and understated production, directed by Chay Yew and choreographed by Kristin Jackson. The only props in the set, designed by Sarah Lambert, are chairs and red rose petals. And most of the sound effects, designed by Laura Grace Brown, are made by feet stomping, hands clapping and fingers slapping against palms and palms against legs. The production, like the play, proves that when it looks as if nothing is going on, looks most certainly deceive.

## OFF BROADWAY REVIEW

**The House of Bernarda Alba***(Intar Theater, New York, 65 seats, \$19 top)*

A National Asian-American Theater Co. presentation of a play in one act by Federico Garcia Lorca. Adapted and directed by Chay Yew. Composer, Fabian Obispo; choreographer, Kristen Jackson; sets, Sarah Lambert; lighting, Stephen Petrilli; costumes, Elly van Horne; sound design, Laura Grace Brown; fight choreographer, Michael G. Chin; stage manager, Enka H. Sellin. Opened Dec. 6, 2000; reviewed Dec. 20. Running time: **1 HOUR, 40 MIN.**

Bernarda Alba	Ching Valdes-Aran
Maria Josefa	Gusti Bogard
Angustias	Natsuko Ohama
Magdalena	Sophie Morae
Amelia	Julienne Hanzelka Kim
Martirio	Julyana Soelisty
Adela	Eunice Wong
Blanca	Michi Barall
La Poncia	Kati Kuroda
Prudencia	Jo Yang

Chorus: Rosanna Canonigo, Jovinna Chan, Jennifer Chang, Nora Chau, Katherine Y. Chung, Nancy Kim, Mami Kimura, Angela Liao, Cindy Lin, Christine Simpson, Shigeiko Suga, Felice Yeh.

By PAMELA RENNER

**C**hay Yew's percussive staging of Federico Garcia Lorca's classic drama "The House of Bernarda Alba" is a reminder of the stark simplicity at the heart of true theater. Opening with a rhythmic ululation that comes from the very marrow of the 22-woman cast, the production closes with a wordless spasm of grief that seems to possess thesp Ching Valdes-Aran body and soul. Indeed, Chay Yew's taut reimagining of the erotic intrigues and longings in a house of cloistered daughters and their maternal jailer is indelible in its intensity.

Lorca's poetic drama is frequently revived but hardly ever done well. There's something about its dense imagery and hydra-headed feminine claustrophobia that seems to bring out the histrionic in directors and actresses. In contrast, Yew's production is taut and controlled, and his superbly disciplined cast features the earthy dynamite of Kati Kuroda as the maid La Poncia, set against the mountainous will of Valdes-Aran as matriarch Bernarda Alba.

To his credit, Yew's direction is a clean and elemental chiaroscuro, rich with shadows and suppressed emotion. There is nothing superfluous here. The choral arrangement of Yew's large cast gives the play a feeling of classical symmetry; ringing the tiny, bare wood stage is a human frame of seated, impassive women in black. These women become the sea, the wind, the humming voice of mourning itself — yet they watch the poisoned struggles and sly seditions of Bernarda's five daughters with a grand impassivity. In this Asian-American transposition of Lorca's milieu, a hint of ancestral faiths hovers over the clean wooden stage without becoming explicit: the observances of watchful ancestors; the touch of a florid and passionate Catholicism in the Philippines; the inscribed parchment messages posted at Shinto village shrines to supplicate the dead and request small rearrangements of fate.



Natsuko Ohama, left, and Ching Valdes-Aran star in Chay Yew's production of Federico Garcia Lorca's play "The House of Bernarda Alba."

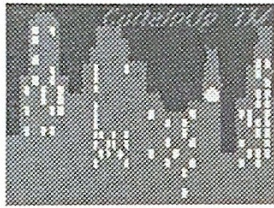
And a rearrangement of fate is precisely what the daughters need. With their natural passions held at bay by the suspended mourning of the house — a prison sentence of eight years of seclusion that Bernarda has imposed upon her youthful, unmarried and variously embittered daughters — the outside world is pushed far away. Bernarda ensures that love and lust will remain distant beacons rather than tangible temptations for her daughters.

But each girl cultivates her own avenue of escape. Amelia buries herself in her dead father's dusty books. Magdalena embroiders and grows into a rigid replica of her mother. Martirio, who outwardly embraces resignation, squirrels away a picture of her secret favorite between her bedsheets. And Angustias — the eldest and plainest of the women, and the heiress to the family fortune — makes plans to wed the same man her sisters adore, Pepe.

A virile opportunist whose true interest is in Adela, the youngest and loveliest of the daughters, Pepe manages to create a wave of havoc and desire among the cloistered daughters without ever appearing onstage in Lorca's text.

And fanning their rebellion at the same time that she is locked in a potentially explosive struggle with her implacable mistress, Kuroda's La Poncia is a formidable creation. As squat and square-shouldered as a carved Buddha, with a plain visage full of peasant cunning and good humor, Kuroda watches and comprehends all that goes on in the stifling house. She sees and observes, and at times lets loose, telling randy tales of her own marriage and courtship to the emotionally starved girls. At one point in the play, she even sings, her huge bass of a voice thrilling through the small house in an old English pastoral tune.

The song sends a pulse of beauty into the air, one of many such moments in this remarkably plangent production. Chay Yew and the talented cast have done right by each of the women in this convulsive family; the poet Lorca himself might be proud to see such a fine production growing in the theatrical soil of his beloved New York City.



# CurtainUp

The Internet Theater Magazine of Reviews, Features, Annotated Listings  
<http://www.curtainup.com>

[HOME PAGE](#)

[SEARCH \*CurtainUp\*](#)

[On TKTS](#)

[LETTERS TO EDITOR](#)

[REVIEWS](#)

[FEATURES](#)

[ADDRESS BOOKS](#)

[Broadway](#)

[Off-Broadway](#)

[DC](#)

[NEWS \(Etcetera\)](#)

[BOOKS and CDs](#)  
(with Amazon search)

[OTHER PLACES](#)

[Berkshires](#)

[DC \(Washington\)](#)

[London](#)

[Los Angeles](#)

[QUOTES](#)

[FILM](#)

[LINKS](#)

## A *CurtainUp* Review *The House of Bernarda Alba*

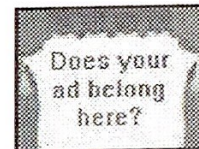
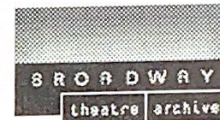
by [Les Gutman](#)

*A woman without a man is wicked.*  
---F. G. Lorca via Chay Yew



5 Girls and 1 Helluva Mother (Photo: Carol Rosegg)

A stark blond-wood platform, blood-red rose petals scattered at its sides, a branch of a red-blooming cherry tree overhead, an enormous white rectangle painted on a black brick wall at its rear, surrounded by 20 or so chairs that might have been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for Tokyo's Imperial Hotel in each of which an Asian woman dressed in black sits. One's initial impression of Chay Yew's beautifully realized production of Lorca's



## MISCELLANEOUS

[Free Updates](#)[Masthead](#)[Type too small?](#)[NYC Weather](#)

masterpiece, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, is of its Asian influences.

This may seem routine to newcomers to this theater company, but as someone familiar with NAATCO's mission and prior work -- presentations of "classic" plays employing many of the finest Asian actors but *without* specific Asian cultural references -- I was a little surprised. Was NAATCO taking a detour from its traditional philosophy that seemed to work so well?

I'm delighted to report that the answer is no. Once Yew's adaptation, gently contemporized but exceedingly faithful, gets under way, it is Lorca's essential Andalusian sensibility that permeates throughout. Perhaps the end-product reveals a more universal Lorca, but it remains his "Spanish Earth" that we can practically taste.

*Bernarda Alba* is fascinating because it is a play with only women, and yet manipulated in so many ways by men. (And I don't even particularly include the fact that it was written and here has been adapted and directed by men.) It is a tragedy about the nature of the male of the species and the manner in which they affect women, both by their presence and their absence.

We meet Bernarda (Ching Valdes-Aran) as she returns with her five daughters from the funeral of her second husband. Already a stern, brutal matriarch, she clamps down even more: ordering that her daughters mourn for eight years. Although each girl is distinguishable (the eldest, Angustias (Natsuko Ohama), the only child of Bernarda's first husband, is unattractive; Magdalena (Sophia Morae), the most like her mother; Amelia (Julienne Hanzelka Kim), bookish and possessed of very modern feminist ideas; Martirio (Julyana Soelistyo), mostly quiet but damagingly resentful; and young Adela (Eunice Wong), the most bewitching and not surprisingly immature), each suffers in some sense from the

exclusion of men from her life -- a means of quenching, in Adela's words, the "fire" that is "coursing through my legs".

Enter Pepe el Romano, the best looking young man in town (well, not enter -- no men are actually *seen* in *The House of Bernarda Alba*), seeking the hand of Angustias in marriage, because it is she alone among the sisters who has wealth. This does not stop him from having an affair with beautiful Adela -- who has the *cajones* to wear red -- nor does it temper Martirio's jealousy. The cane-wielding, witch-like Bernarda has quite a cauldron on her hands.

Stirring the pot even more are Bernarda's two maids, Blanca (Michi Barall, for whom NAATCO Artistic Director Mia Katigbak subbed at the production I saw), who suffers in her own right since she was the dead husband's lover, and La Poncia (Kati Kuroda), Bernarda's would-be confidant, conveniently an inveterate gossip and snoop as well. Oh yes, and Bernarda's silver-haired mother (Gusti Bogard), kept by Bernarda in the dungeon, and delusional either because of or as a result of this. (She wears a white wedding gown, and talks of getting married and having a baby.) The end is tragic, as much or more than one would expect if we didn't know.

Mr. Yew has brilliantly accented the proceedings with a chorus of twelve black-clad women who sometimes clap, sometimes sing or hum and occasionally enter the story. The sum effect -- aided by Stephen Petrilli's dramatic lighting, a couple of songs by Fabian Obispo and even Kristin Jackson's choreography -- is stunning. Yew executes a trunkful of splendid ideas (both in his dramaturgy and stagecraft) worthy of extended discussion that I'll resist engaging in here.

NAATCO has repeatedly presented actors whose talents exceed our expectations

for inexpensive off-off-Broadway stages, and this play is no exception. Indeed, the ten cast members bring extraordinary resources to this stage, and I wish time and space permitted me to discuss the abundant luxury in detail. I feel compelled to single out the Obie-winning Ching Valdes-Aran, who presents us with a Bernarda as hard as a rock and yet who shatters like a piece of delicate crystal. The other performance I mention specially is a surprise. Kati Kuroda's La Poncia is masterful; she forcefully commands our attention and engagingly entertains, coming close to stealing the show.

Several years ago, *CurtainUp* reviewed another adaptation of *Bernarda Alba*, Migdalia Cruz's *Another Part of the House* (see link below). That proved to be an unsatisfying experience that veered drastically from the beauty of Lorca's great play. NAATCO and Chay Yew have righted that ship, honoring this classical treasure with the stature it deserves.

#### LINK

*CurtainUp*'s review of *Another Part of the House*

THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA  
by Federico Garcia Lorca  
Adapted and directed by Chay Yew

---

with Ching Valdes-Aran, Gusti Bogard,  
Natsuko Ohama, Sophia Morae, Julienne  
Hanzelka Kim, Julyana Soelistyo,  
Eunice Wong, Michi Barall (replaced  
by Mia Katigbak at reviewed  
performance), Kati Kuroda and Jo  
Yang, plus a chorus of 12

Set Design: Sarah Lambert  
Lighting Design: Stephen Petrilli  
Costume Design: Elly van Horne  
Sound Design: Lauara Grace Brown  
Composer: Fabian Obispo

Choreographer: Kristin Jackson  
Fight Choreographer: Michael G. Chin  
Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes with  
no intermission

A production of the National Asian-  
American Theatre Company (NAATCO)  
Intar Theatre, 508 West 53rd Street  
(10/11 Aves.) (718) 623-1672

# Full House

NY Blade  
Dec 8

Chay Yew brings new life to Lorca's *House of Bernarda Alba*

BY DAVID NOH

Chay Yew has adapted and directed a superb production of gay Spanish playwright Federico Garcia Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, with an all-Asian female cast. In the process, he has taken this unwieldy, oppressive 1936 masterwork, which can be such theatrical heavy weather, and transformed it into something utterly fresh and real.

Using a bare stage and a minimum of props, all of the exposition and emotion is expressed through the voices and bodies they are! One feels a simple, surging thrill at seeing so many talented Asian women finally given a chance to really *do* something onstage. The "Greek chorus" could easily be a dramatic cliché but its presence only heightens the tension of the play, while adding both aural and physical grace at just the right moments. Audiences will come away from this with a fuller understanding of the work. The play seems larger than merely being about the oppression of women as seen through Bernarda's puritanical dominance over her household; indeed, here Bernarda might well be fascist dictator General Franco

himself, and the females cowering beneath her representatives of an oppressed Spain. Stripped of individual freedom, it's small wonder that they turn against one another, with betrayals similar to those perpetrated during the Spanish Civil War, when families were torn asunder by politics.

In the title role, veteran Ching Valdes-Aran has an impressively authoritative elegance and, instead of making Bernarda a mere gorgon, invests her with a subtle charisma and humor that illuminate her seductive power. Kati Kuroda again proves herself one of New York's finest actors with a richly human and comical portrait of Bernarda's maidservant. Julyana Soelistyo, who was so absolutely magical in David Hwang's *Golden Child*, brings her uncanny, aristocratic talent to the part of the most duplicitous of the Alba daughters. Natsuko Ohama is amusingly querulous as the plain but rich daughter, and Eunice Wong is lovely and deliciously spirited as the most rebellious daughter.

The *House of Bernarda Alba* plays at Intar Theater, 508 W. 53rd St. For information, call (212) 623-1677



By Carol Roszage

Natsuko Ohama (left) and Ching Valdes-Aran bring new meaning to *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

10019

SHIRLEY HERZ  
**S** associates

165 WEST 46th STREET, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036 • (212) 221-8466 • FAX: (212) 921-8023

PRICE \$3.00

THE

DEC. 18, 2000

NEW YORKER

Nally's book and David Yazbek's songs strike notes of class consciousness and unemployment-related low male self-esteem a little too hard, but soon enough the show's winning good humor and inventiveness kick in, and if you don't find yourself laughing consistently (and tearing up occasionally), well, then, maybe you don't *deserve* to see six men prancing around in red G-strings. (Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 239-6200.)

**GAME SHOW**

The action of Bob Walton and Jeffrey Finn's "play" clumsily shifts from a trivia contest between audience volunteers to scripted, behind-the-scenes backstabbing between the producer (Cheryl Stern) and the host (Michael McGrath) of the show within the show. The drama that unfolds during the "commercial breaks" is flat, but the participatory sequences are surprisingly amusing, if only because they involve laughing at the contestants (at a recent show, a professional woman defined a "gynephobe" as a person who is afraid of giants). (45 Bleecker, at 45 Bleecker St. 307-4100.)

**GORE VIDAL'S THE BEST MAN**

Gore Vidal's sophisticated, elegant, and damned entertaining 1960 play about the politics of politics, whose mots are as eerily accurate for Shrub and Al as they were, originally, for Adlai and Tricky Dick. (10/2/00) (Virginia, 245 W. 52nd St. 239-6200.)

**THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA**

The National Asian American Theatre Company is known for opening up the classics with all-Asian performances, and they've done it again with this stark, lovely, and evocative production. A fine cast and chorus perform the Spanish poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca's 1935 drama, in which the widowed Bernarda imprisons her five daughters and orders them to mourn their stepfather for eight years. Directed by Chay Yew, who also adapted Lorca's text. (INTAR II, 508 W. 53rd St. 718-623-1672.)

**JANE EYRE**

The musical. Marla Schaffel is Jane; James Barbour is Rochester. With a book by John Caird and a score by Paul Gordon. Directed by Mr. Caird and Scott Schwartz. (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 307-4100.)

**JESUS HOPPED THE 'A' TRAIN**

A six-week encore run of Stephen Adly Guirgis's drama about the relationship between two convicts in protective custody at Riker's Island. Philip Seymour Hoffman is the director. (East 13th Street Theatre, 136 E. 13th St. 239-6200. Closes Dec. 31.)

**JULIUS CAESAR**

The British-American Aquila Theatre Company's modern-dress staging of Shakespeare's play. (Clark Studio Theatre, 70 Lincoln Center Plaza. 279-4200. Closes Dec. 23.)

phrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. (McGinn/Cazale, Broadway at 76th St. 206-1515.)

**PROOF**

The Manhattan Theatre Club's staging of David Auburn's drama, starring Mary-Louise Parker, has reopened on Broadway. Daniel Sullivan is the director. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 239-6200.)

**RICHARD III**

The Pearl Theatre Company's version of Shakespeare's play. (80 St. Mark's Pl. 505-9802. Closes Dec. 17.)

**THE ROCKY HORROR SHOW**

Rather than a revival of Richard O'Brien's 1973 musical, Christopher Ashley's production is an unsexy and oddly earnest homage to the 1975 cult-movie adaptation. It plays to the already converted (who can dance the Time Warp with the help of a ten-dollar "participation bag" containing confetti, a light-up key chain, and toilet paper), but it offers the rest of the audience no sense of irony and no insight into why, or how, O'Brien's glam tribute to fifties horror movies became such a phenomenon. The only air of self-parody comes from the impish Dick Cavett; as the narrator, he gives the show a shot of vitality with his improvised standup shtick and, if you're lucky, his version of the Moonwalk. The rest of the casting is inspired (although Lea DeLaria and Joan Jett are sadly underused), but the performers can't



# The Chorus Is Dancing, And the Mother's Grim

Death pervades "The House of Bernarda Alba," not only the two that are knelled at the beginning and end of Federico García Lorca's last play but also the suffocating atmosphere that permeates

## THEATER REVIEW

WILBORN  
HAMPTON

life for the inhabitants inside. The National Asian American Theater Company has mounted a first-rate revival in an adaptation by Chay Yew that is somewhat abbreviated but maintains García Lorca's tragic claustrophobia.

Certainly there was a lot of death in Spain at the time the play was written, and García Lorca himself was gunned down by Franco's Nationalists shortly after he finished it, in 1936 at the age of 38. Some critics have read a political message into the play, but while liberty is a central theme, it is for the freedom of the individual, especially women, from society's repressive mores.

At the outset Bernarda Alba has just buried another husband and is returning from the funeral with her five daughters. Appearances are paramount to Bernarda. If she knew of her husband's affair with the servant Blanca, she ignores it and or-

*"The House of Bernarda Alba" continues through June 23 at the Nagelberg Theater, Baruch Performing Arts Center, 55 Lexington Avenue, at 25th Street; (212) 279-4200.*



Bruce Johnson

Ching Valdes-Aran, left, as Bernarda Alba, with Kati Kuroda.

## The House of Bernarda Alba

Baruch Performing Arts Center

ders eight years of mourning for him. She denies villagers the opportunity to criticize her by not letting them in her house. She locks away her own mother because she could be an embarrassment.

Bernarda tries to preserve her daughters' chastity by not allowing them outside except to go to church. Even then, she admonishes them not to let their eyes wander to the men in the congregation. "Women in church should never look at a man, except the priest, and he only because he's wearing a skirt."

## Five daughters locked in a house of repressive mores.

But even houses with double locks have windows, and Bernarda can do little to prevent her daughters from looking out of them to watch the bare-chested field hands, or to keep Pepe el Romano, the village's young buck, from late-night visits beneath them. Pepe may end up engaged to Angustias, the oldest and ugliest of Bernarda's daughters, but it is Adela, the youngest and most beautiful of the girls, for whom he lusts.

Mr. Yew, who also directed, has assembled a fine cast for the production, at the Baruch Performing Arts Center. The ensemble includes a 12-member chorus that dances a flamenco at one point and provides a variety of sound effects, from clapping for castanets to slapping their thighs for galloping horses.

As Bernarda Alba, Ching Valdes-Aran is a portrait of strait-laced rectitude. With her hair pulled tight in a bun and wielding her cane like a scepter, Ms. Valdes-Aran could be a cross between Madame Mao and Madame Chiang Kai-shek with a Castilian accent. Natsuko Ohama and Carmen M. Herlihy deliver excellent performances as Angustias, the eldest sister, and Martirio, the daughter who spies on her siblings. Ali Ahn flashes with youthful passion as Adela, and Kati Kuroda provides a good turn as Poncia, Bernarda's old servant.