

LA Review: 'Peace in Our Time'

Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theatre

Reviewed by David C. Nichols

OCTOBER 26, 2011



Photo by Geoffrey Wade

"London Pride," Noël Coward's deathless 1941 anthem, here frames his rarely seen 1946 antiwar melodrama, and it's thematically apt. So is the play, which adaptor Barry Creyton, director Casey Stangl, and a magnificent double-cast ensemble shape into a significant theatrical event of this or any year.

Coward's re-imagining of a Nazi-occupied England is unapologetically message-driven. Creyton's adaptation excises the obscurest terms and densest polemic, interpolating Coward songs —music director Richard Levinson alternates on piano with John Allee—into its patriotic meditation. The resulting slice-of-life panorama finds director Stangl deftly marshalling key points around designer Tom Buderwitz's superb pub set, aided by Jeremy Pivnick's moody lighting, John Zalewski's atmospheric sound, and the stellar performers.

Assuming 22 roles with an authenticity that mirrors costumer Jessica Olson's period garb, each cast has contrasting strengths, equal commitment. The "Epps Cocoa" cast recalls a Gilbert Miller-assembled Broadway troupe, the "Stubbs Special" crew a David Lean film roster. Steve Hofvendahl and Lily Knight play tavern owners Fred and Nora Shattock as common folk whose heroism gradually surfaces; Josh Clark and Eve Gordon suggest Bernard Miles and Gracie Fields in the roles. As their resistance-minded daughter, Danielle K. Jones is deceptively casual, Abby Wilde candidly acute. Jason Dechert and Brian Tichnell supply corresponding yet distinctive intensity as their freedom-fighter son.

Raleigh Holmes' calm radiance and Rebecca Mozo's noir-tinged vibrancy bring cabaret singer Lyia Vivian to spot-on life, respectively well-paired with understated Christopher Guilmet and chipper Daniel Bess as tacit agent George Bourne. Amelia White and John Wallace Combs are slightly more human-scaled as bereaved Mr. and Mrs. Grainger, Anna Mathias and Philip Proctor a tad easier in the group songs. Graham Hamilton and

John Francis O'Brien are gripping as their POW son, Peter Larney and Mark Doerr commanding as the British Underground doctor.

As lethally amiable Nazi Albrecht Richter, elfin Jason Henning has insidious charm, bravura Rob Nagle unsettling presence. Drew Doyle and Zoe Perry are ornately tickling, Buck Zachary and Karianne Flaathen innately droll, as soused Alfie and Lily Blake. Kendra Chell lets her stage business supply subtext as Alma Boughton; Ann Noble uses her lighthouse eyes to the same aims. And, critically, Emily Chase inhabits defiant nationalist Janet Braid with an acerbic potency that ignites JD Cullum's brilliantly detailed Nazi collaborator Chorley Bannister; Rebekah Tripp is subtly incendiary opposite Bill Brochtrup's effortless acidity; all four are electrifying. Susan Boyd Joyce, Chris Clowers, Paul Culos, Etta Devine, Joseph Fuhr, Belen Greene, Adam Meyer, Rosalyn Mitchell, Melinda Peterson, Jesse Sharp, Joanna Strapp, and Patrick Wenk-Wolff complete the rotating ranks.

Yes, Cowards mastery is old school. The songs, which don't always move things forward, require forbearance. Still, those who think "Peace" has nothing to say to our times might consider how systemically corporatism—an entrée to fascism, for centuries now—has overridden America's media and government, as in the Citizens United ruling, the Tea Party's co-option by big business, the wildfire spread of the Occupy Wall Street counter-reaction. That and the artistic vitality mark this incisive revival as a must-see achievement.

Presented by the Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Oct. 20-Dec. 11. Thu.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2:30 p.m. (dark Nov. 24). (818) 506-1983. www.antaeus.org.