

FEATURE by Steve Julian - October 19, 2011

Antaeus Company Musically Adapts Coward's Peace In Our Time



Abby Wilde and Josh Clark in "Peace in Our Time"

Barry Creyton is possibly the best person to adapt a **Noël Coward** work that hasn't seen the light of day in Los Angeles in 60 years. "I met Noël Coward socially in 1970," he says. "I said then it was like meeting God, except that I think Noël Coward had a better sense of construction."

Creyton grew up in Australia, worked in television in the 1960s and moved on to TV work in London, where he happened to have the same physician as Marlene Dietrich, John Gielgud and Coward. “He was everybody’s doctor and a very good friend of mine.”



Barry Creyton

It was at his doctor’s 50th birthday bash that Creyton — a playwright, singer and an actor ([Antaeus](#) Company’s *Cousin Bette*) with a formidable classical theater baritone — met the man whom he idolized. “When I was a working actor in London I had access to a wonderful library near my house, and I read as an exercise all of Coward’s plays back to back. His sense of construction is ideal in all of them, whether the plays are good or bad. They are constructed brilliantly.”

Reading them all, Creyton believes, was a great lesson for a writer, certainly for an actor, to see how each would play out. “I think some of them have fallen by the wayside but some have gone on forever: *Private Lives*, *Hay Fever*, *Present Laughter*, *Blithe Spirit* – they all go on, still performed. There is so little known about *Peace in Our Time* because it related only to the Second World War and it’s a ‘what-if’ play, so it was a joy to research.”

Coward, who died in 1973, embarked on this work, first published in 1947, to answer the question: Is it tougher to be blitzed as Londoners were in World War II and lose so many lives, or to be occupied by the invading army? “He felt it was more dispiriting to a population to be occupied, as the French were in Paris,” says

Creyton. “I think he makes that point very clearly in this play.”

The project came to Creyton, who moved to Los Angeles 20 years ago to pen a TV movie for Hearst Television, from former Antaeus artistic director Jeanie Hackett. “She asked if I would like to do an adaptation of this play and perhaps put a few songs into it, so I ran with it. I thought ‘put a few songs in it’ wasn’t good enough, so I tweezed about 40 minutes of dialogue out of the play and 12 characters. I chose nine of Coward’s lesser known songs and integrated them into the text.”



Raleigh Holmes and JD Cullum in "Peace in Our Time"

It was difficult, he admits. “I was at the desk from about 9 to 5 everyday for three solid weeks choosing lines that I thought were no longer relevant or no longer important. Certainly a lot of the political polemic went because it no longer means much – and certainly didn’t mean much in America anyway. The essence of the play is still the same, and I don’t think I destroyed anything Coward intended.”

The Coward Foundation, with which Creyton says he and Hackett worked closely, generally would not permit the use of well-known songs. “They had to fit into the scenes very carefully, otherwise they would appear gratuitous. The obvious ones, *Don’t Let’s Be Beastly to the Germans* and *Could You Please Oblige Us With A Bren Gun* are certainly World War II songs, but *London Pride* is the only really well-known song in there. It’s rather like an anthem because it’s a fiercely patriotic play.”

Among the lesser-known songs are *Come, the Wild, Wild Weather*. Creyton says, “It is a very sweet song and one of the characters is a cabaret performer. It’s a perfect opportunity for her to do that at a poignant moment in the play.”

A 1950 *Los Angeles Times* review of the play, as performed at the Pasadena Playhouse, alludes to a cast of 40 – and no music. Creyton pared it down to fewer than two dozen characters. Times two when counting actors, of course, because Antaeus double casts.

The Pub



Amelia White, Lily Knight and John Combs;

Photo by Geoffrey Wade

Eve Gordon and **Lily Knight** (TV's *Big Love*) play separately the pub proprietors. Knight believes this play is up for a revisit. "With all the occupations these days and conversations about torture? Yes. There are things going on all over the world that are very similar to what happened then."

Peace in Our Time sometimes asks unanswerable questions. "It's one of the really brilliant things about the writing," Knight finds. "Questions get discussed but nothing quite gets resolved, so it's really great brain fodder for us now, such as 'what is decency?', 'what is our role in the world?' and 'what is worth fighting for and adapting to?'"

Bill Brochtrup (TV's *NYPD Blue*) and **JD Cullum** are double cast as Brits who collaborate with the Nazis. Brochtrup says, "The play talks a lot about patriotism and love of country, and that's not something we've always embraced [in the US]. I think the time is right for this to be revived. The world has changed since people were waving flag pins after 9-11. But now there's a cynicism that we're all party to, and this play speaks in interesting ways about that."



Jason Henning and Bill Brochtrup; Photo by Steven Brand

It is “super patriotic,” he says. “We’ve seen people and nations rising up recently, like with Arab Spring. This play raises interesting questions about these issues that aren’t just black and white. They’re gray.”

Knight adds, “It’s interesting to note that in our own country now there is so much divisiveness, especially between the two parties. This play depicts a unification among the Brits through their love of country.”

But that unification is no less strong among the Nazis who force the Brits into self-examination. Brochtrup points to a “wonderful speech by one of the Nazis” about how much they believe in their vision. “It’s dicey,” he admits. And as for anti-Semitism, Knight adds, “Coward skirts it most of the time, but there are a lot of Jews in England, a lot of Communists – what’s going to happen to them? Well, they’re going to be liquidated or deported. It’s pretty bald.”

Emily Chase and **Bekah Tripp** are double cast as writers. Tripp says, “Around 9-11 it was one for all and all for one, because we had been assaulted on our own ground. That’s the most comparable sense of righteousness and resoluteness I’ve witnessed in my life.”

“We see some people collaborate with the Germans and some who don’t,” notes Brochtrup. “Some are torn. We talked to a woman who survived the occupation of France and she talked about her neighbors in her apartment building. Some were collaborating, some were hiding Jewish people, so there was a full range. This play

explores all of that.”



Rebekah Tripp, Ann Noble, Eve Gordon and Abby Wilde; Photo by Steven Brand

Someone mentions zombies, and the talk turns to how humans would fare in such an attack. “You have to ask yourself those questions,” says Brochtrup. “Would you be a fierce fighter, would you have the strength to stand up? I would like to think I would, but there’s no way to know unless you’re in that situation. We’ve been lucky to not find ourselves there. You want to believe you’d be a hero, but not everyone is.”

Along with the woman from France, the cast met Irlando Ferreira, a Cape Verdean who lives and works in Lisbon, Portugal. Knight remembers a point he made — “how we as Americans don’t have it in our cell memory what it’s like to be an occupied country or to fight for our independence. I feel very grateful that we don’t. But we also have a great awareness of how many people are going through that very problem around the world today. Watching this I realize my own problems are pretty paltry.”

Tripp adds, “It also begs the question whether you would give everything you have for a cause that’s larger than you, particularly when you might not even be able to see the result of what you give.”

The Piano

Antaeus is not known as a musical theater troupe, but Creyton says he found some astonishing singers. And, admittedly, a few who sound appropriately inebriated as they wail their songs.

The "Stubbs Specials" cast of "Peace in OurTime"; Photo by Steven Brand



“Most pubs when I was a kid had an upright piano they banged away on,” remembers Creyton. “I’ve tried to integrate the songs so they make sense on the piano. It’s not musical theater; it’s a play with music. The owner of the pub sings, the landlord sings, some of the customers sing, just as they would around a piano.”

Tripp, who has read the original work and took part in Antaeus’ workshop of this project a year ago, finds the text can be heady and intellectual. “So the integration of songs adds life to it and gives the pub a fuller atmosphere. It takes on its own life as the songs juxtapose some dark words with some light music.”

Creyton reminisces about the birthday party at which he met Noël Coward. “I felt as if I should have been intimidated, but I found him to be very warm, very generous. We talked about our mutual friends and we talked about his numbers, the songs of his I had done in cabaret. We talked about his plays that I had done. You instantly feel inferior in the company of someone like this, talking about his own work.”

Creyton recalls mentioning a song of Coward’s he had most often performed in cabaret. “*Poor Uncle Harry*, which was a nice, jolly 6/8 number about a missionary. I mentioned, I think as just something to say, that I always had trouble remembering the second refrain and he said ‘So did I’, which I thought was extremely generous of him. I even mentioned a line he had written from one of his works, and he couldn’t remember having written it but he thought it was extremely funny.”

Another “what if” question comes to mind: What if Creyton had yet another opportunity to visit with Noël Coward? “Well, first, I think I would apologize for taking liberties with his work. But I would still compliment him on his astonishing construction. Everything that should happen happens in exactly the right place.”

***Peace in Our Time*, presented by the Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd. North Hollywood. Directed by Casey Stangl. Opens Oct. 20. Plays Thur– Sat 8 pm; Sun 2:30 pm. Through Dec. 11. Tickets: \$30-34. 818-506-1983. www.antaeus.org.**

*****All *Peace in Our Time* production photos by Karianne Flaathen except where noted.**