

Peace in Our Time

Written by Thomas Waldman, Theatre Reviewer



L to R: Ann Noble, Karianne Flaathen, Buck Zachary, Melinda Peterson, Rebekah Tripp
Photo by Steven Brand

Human beings are imbued with a sense of historical inevitability. Once an event happens, we believe it had to have happened, and in just that way; the rise of Hitler, the fall of the Soviet Union, the toppling of Arab dictators in rapid succession.

It was this habit, and its attendant feelings of self-satisfaction and complacency, which concerned the famous British playwright and nearly-as-famous British patriot Noel Coward when he wrote "Peace in Our Time," in 1946, a scant one year after allied forces destroyed the Thousand-Year Reich.

In the play, which had a brief run in Pasadena in 1950 and is currently being performed by the Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theatre, the regulars at an inviting London pub are living under Nazi occupation, beginning in late 1940. The efforts of the brave men of the Royal Air Force to repel the Germans at the Battle of Britain in this version proved insufficient to the monumental task.

Coward deploys his classic elements, dazzling language and a wonderfully logical internal narrative, in service of the jarring notion that the Master Race had actually conquered the tough, gritty Brits. This adaptation, by the actor and playwright Berry Creyton, also includes a number of the author's songs.

It is testimony to the enduring and perverse legacy of the Nazis that this reversal would seem chilling today, 66 years after the end of the war. "Peace in Our Time" is not one of those light, audience-pleasing "what if" specials that occasionally appear on cable.

More important, the extraordinary performances of the 22-member Friday night Antaeus cast (the roles are performed by a different Antaeus cast Saturday night) make the reappearance of "Peace in Our Time" after six decades a bona fide theatrical event, which must not be missed by devotees of Coward and should not be missed by theatergoers, rabid or casual.



L to R: Rebecca Mozo, Daniel Bess, Josh Clark, Jason Henning, Bill Brochtrup
Photo by Steven Brand

For 2011, director Casey Stangl faced a problem that his counterparts in London and Pasadena did not face with the original productions of "Peace in Our Time;" how to present a Nazi character that was neither kitsch, schlock, nor comic relief, intended or otherwise. Over the years, the fictional Nazi has been depicted one way in "Cabaret," another in "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In," and another still in "Hogan's Heroes," to cite a few of the better-known examples from popular culture.

The problem is solved brilliantly in Rob Nagle's rendering of Albrecht Richter, the Gestapo bureaucrat who oversees the pub. Richter's embrace of the Fuhrer's vision is fervent and true, never expedient -- he is a man born to Nazism. With one notable exception, the pub regulars rightly despise Richter, which is absolutely critical for the plot to engage a contemporary audience.

The exception, an arrogant intellectual/critic with the ultra-English name of Chorley Bannister, is rather fond of the Germans and Austrians who have come to liberate Anglo society from its own decadence. Bannister represents Coward's composite of a particular Englishman who saw in Hitler's triumph the long-awaited, much-needed antidote to the messiness of Western democracy and freedom.

In the Antaeus production, Bannister is marvelously played by Bill Brochtrup; his stiff posture, extreme impatience, and unshakeable certitude conveying a person who cannot wait for the New Order to begin.

While all the characters find Bannister contemptible, it's a writer named Janet Braid (Rebekka Tripp) who possesses the sharp intelligence and verbal confidence to challenge him on his own terms. Their duel of words is among the best scenes in a production that has many such from which to choose.

"Peace in Our Time" is performed Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m., and Sundays at 2:30 p.m., through December 11th.