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Peace in Our Time



In 1946, when he wrote *Peace in Our Time*, Noel Coward created almost half again as many characters as are portrayed in Barry Creyton's new adaptation. Creyton has stripped out a number of small roles talking politics to get the cast down to twenty-three, and in place of those words added a dozen Coward songs from the period. He has not entirely filled the hole left by the missing parts, but, under Casey Stangl's sure direction, the Antaeus Company actors perform as if it is they, and not their characters, who have been liberated from bondage.

Germany might have won the battle of Britain and occupied England from 1940 to 1945. This disturbing premise embodies the Cowardian virtues of heroism and humanity, especially given its setting of a homely neighborhood watering hole. Staging this play in 1946 was an act of bravery in an England eager to forget the horrors of war, but Coward knew that, as battered and blitzed as they were, most Englishmen had not seen what he had of the true cost of war. As an agent of British intelligence stationed in Paris, Coward observed first-hand the demoralization and outrage, and sometimes the collaboration, of the French subjected to German occupation. He also saw the intimate and dangerous workings of the Resistance, which helped the Allied cause even as it cost the lives of many patriots.

He wrote a play to remind his countrymen that things might have been, and might yet be, worse. Like all Coward plays, even the lightest comedies, *Peace* has a finely balanced construction, measuring exposition, character and drama into a powerful cocktail. This one uses humor, melodrama and Grand Guignol to tell a classic story of struggle and redemption among the families that frequent a London pub, *The Shy Gazelle*. While the plot's twists are not the most original in the canon of wartime storylines, they are banked and shored by the inimitable Coward wit and passion. Primarily the play is a philosophical argument against subservience to fate, made explicit in political terms - a Neville Chamberlain misquote comprises the title. Yes, Coward could preach, but he was rarely long-winded. So Creyton's decision to cut so much of the political material, ostensibly to make the play more accessible to a modern American audience, seems both unnecessary and unfortunate.

Traditionalists are tiresome, so the fact that Coward didn't want songs in his play shouldn't be too upsetting, unless the songs interfere with the pace. They don't; and every time I thought I would become annoyed with a third, fifth or seventh song break, it charmed me, with a single exception. "Come the Wild, Wild Weather," even though well-used here, is a sappy tune that seems to have given Sondheim every one of his bad habits. But while overall these songs work, they do imperfectly replace that important political element, a fabric woven across a frame of small, important characters, without which the story's hackneyed elements (mother worries about soldier son; cruel conquerors antagonize innocent civilians) are too starkly revealed. In a sense, these songs *are* political: many feature lyrics about killing, vomiting on, or forgiving the Germans for their bad behavior. Others praise London, or egalitarian virtues like love, maturity, and

strength in adversity. And these tunes hold what's left of the story together, I must admit, rather well. If the end comes suddenly, with the big plot points piling up out of the blue after a leisurely first two-thirds, it's still a pleasure to witness.

This is because the cast is so stocked with talent, who in turn are so obviously ecstatic to speak these words. I can't remember a big cast this consistently excellent. Not everyone is equally talented at sustaining dialect, and the one or two less-than-stellar performances out of forty-six (the play's dual casts play alternating nights) are hardly noticeable in the dazzle of such riches. Many, many of these characterizations are so brilliant that I just typed half the cast into my first draft of this review, which, believe it or not, made the thing even less readable. Realistically I can only mention two - Lily Knight, as uber-representative of the leading players, who affected me as much as any actor has done; and Patrick Wenk-Wolff, who in his single hilarious ten-minute scene teaches a master class on how to sell character. Stangl's direction, and Jeremy Pivnick's lights, reveal and highlight this cast with efficiency and grace.

This handsome production will get an audience - with this many cast members, how could it not - but it especially ought to be seen by young people, and most specifically by those who don't think they like theater. Disguised as imagined history, like all great art it's about the future. It's a very traditional-looking show, with its detailed Tom Buderwicz set and gorgeous costumes by Jessica Olson, yet it feels vividly new, as Coward so frequently does. We can't resist him. He's as compassionate as writers get, and his sympathy lies with the audience. Therefore ours lies with him.

October 20 through December 11 at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Boulevard, North Hollywood.
Tickets and information: (818) 506-1983 or www.Antaeus.org